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The Memoirs of a Lady of Quality

BY

G. W. M. REYNOLDS



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THE
YOUNG DUCHESS:

OR

MEMORIALS OF A LADY OF QUALITY.

BY

GEORGE W. M. REYNOLDS.

New Edition Volume No 1.

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CONTENTS OF VOL 1.

CHAPTER	PAGE.
I. Imogen	1
II. The Cottage	8
III. Thornbury Park	18
IV. The two friends	26
V. The house in Berkely Square	33
VI. Alice Denton and her friend	40
VII. The Parish clerk	47
VIII. The discourse at the Gate	53
IX. The mill	61
X. A Discovery	72
XI. The Duke and Duchess	78
XII. Southdale	87
XIII. Ethel	96
IV. The circus... ..	107
XV. Launcelot	114
XVI. The Firs	121
XVII. The Squire's Bed Chamber	129
XVIII. The Den	139
XIX. The Baronet and Sylvester	148
XX. Ardleigh House	154
XXI. Mr. Warren	165
XXII. One—Two	172

THE YOUNG DUCHESS;

OR

MEMOIRS OF A LADY OF QUALITY.

PART THE FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

IMOGEN.

WE are about to introduce the reader to a small and plainly furnished room, in a house situated in one of the streets behind Astley's Theatre at the foot of Westminster Bridge. This little parlour, though humble in its appointments, was nevertheless of a most scrupulous neatness and cleanliness. As the warm weather was setting in and fires could be dispensed with, an ornament of variegated papers concealed the grate: a nosegay of violets and primroses in a glass standing upon the table, rendered the atmosphere fragrant; and a green Venetian blind, or *jalousie*, lowered completely down inside the open window, shut out from the view the dingy brick buildings on the opposite side of the street. There was a good looking-glass over the mantel, which likewise displayed some pretty china ornament. On a side table stood a

work-box and a writing-desk: and there were some twenty or thirty volumes on a shelf in a recess. A lithograph portrait of a beautiful female in a strange fantastic dress, was suspended to the wall facing the mirror: and the original of that portrait was now reclining on the sofa, listlessly following with her eyes the movements of a little girl of about four years old who was playing about the room.

Fantastic indeed was the dress of that female. A small Greek cap, with a couple of pheasant's feathers, rested with an air of unstudied coquettishness upon a head of faultless formation. The features were purely Grecian: the complexion was beautifully clear and transparent; and though the cheeks were pale, yet they exhibited that freshness of the skin which is characteristic of health. Her eyes, of a beautiful blue, had a look which was alike vivacious and languishing; and her hair, of a rich dark brown, was lustrous with its own natural gloss. Her lips—

the upper one being fuller than the lower—had an expression half smiling, and half serious, which corresponded with that of the eyes, and thus confirmed the general aspect of this beautiful countenance. She was a little above the middle height, but seemed taller than she really was because her figure was so striking and brilliant. With a certain robustness of limbs, all her proportions were nevertheless adjusted to the most perfect symmetry, tapering at the extremities into beautifully formed hands and elegantly shaped feet. Hers was a figure which conveyed the impression of strength blended with agility—a rounded fulness of the contours sufficiently developed for personal beauty, but not to be inconsistent with the liness and flexibility of the entire form.

And now, to revert to her costume, we must proceed to observe that a light under-garment, with a very short skirt, was confined at the waist by a crimson sash, or rather folded scarf, after the oriental fashion. The upper garment consisting of a purple velvet jacket made to button over the bosom at will, but now left open. The jacket itself was sleeveless; but the light under-garment before mentioned had short sleeves reaching not so far as the elbow; and thus the white well-modelled arms were left almost completely bare. She wore breeches made to fit loosely and fastened just below the knees with long pendant ribbons. Flesh coloured silk stocking made the lower part of the leg seem bare down to the well-made and tight-fitting cloth boots, which without the slightest seam or wrinkle

adjusted themselves each to the precise shape of the rounded ankle and the long narrow foot. Bracelets were upon the wrists, and there were rings to ornament the small, flexible, exquisitely chiselled ears; but truth compels us to add that all the jewellery thus displayed by the young female would not have amounted to the value of many pounds sterling.

Who was she? We have already said that her portrait was suspended in the room; and beneath it appeared the name of MADEMOISELLE IMOGENE. But there were two or three notes lying upon the table; and one was addressed to Mademoiselle Imogen—the final e, be it observed, being omitted. The other letters were addressed to plain *Miss Hartland*; and as the young female had opened and read all these letters when they arrived, we naturally infer that she was miss Hartland in private life, but Mademoiselle Imogene in some public capacity. In respect to her age, it would not have been very easy for even the shrewdest observer to fix it with any degree of precision; for while the well-developed form and matured contours seemed on the one hand to indicate the ripe womanhood of three or four and twenty, yet on the other hand the delicacy of the features and the air of youthful freshness that invested her would engender the surmise that her age could barely exceed twenty.

Nothing could transcend the infantile loveliness of the little girl who was playing about the room. She was, as we have already said about four years old; and a luxuriant profusion of soft and fine flaxen curls set off a

countenance the complexion of which was formed of milk and roses. The eyes were of a clear azure; and the little lips, thin and delicately cut, were as vivid in their hue as wet coral. The child was dressed with the utmost taste and neatness,—her entire appearance indicating that she was the object of the most scrupulous care.

The portrait to which we have before alluded, represented Mademoiselle Imogene in precisely the same dress which we have described: but it gave her the air of a Greek Bacchanal at a masquerade, placed in a lounging position against a seat in the box of a theatre, and smoking a cigarette. On the other hand, at the moment when we introduce her to our readers, she is half reclining upon a sofa in a small but neatly-furnished room; and she has no cigarette in her hand. Her eyes are listlessly following the movements of the child: but her countenance grows gradually more and more serious, the half-smile fading away from her lips. She becomes completely absorbed in thought: and her eyelids droop—not because drowsiness is coming over them, but because all her attention being now concentrated inwards, is shutting out from itself as it were every external object.

Thus some minutes passed: and then all of a sudden a strange light flashed in the deep blue eyes under the half-closed lids; and with a quick spasmodic start, she flung her looks upon the child, muttering, "Little wretch! you are the cause of all I suffer!"

The child did not catch the

sense of the words—she only heard their sound: and she was at the same time frightened by the sudden start which the female gave. Thinking, therefore, that she had in some way provoked her anger, the child threw down her doll and burst into tears.

"Dear, dear little thing!" cried Mademoiselle Imogene: and then this strange creature of sudden impulses caught the child up in her arms and pressed it to her bosom "Don't cry, my love! for heaven's sake don't cry! I was not angry with you! Oh, pray don't cry—dear, dear little Annie!"

The child went on sobbing as if its little heart would break; and nothing could exceed the pain which Mademoiselle Imogene evidently experienced while endeavouring to soothe that grief.

"Don't cry like this, my dear little Annie!" she said in a voice that was even piteously entreating. "Oh, to think I should have drawn forth all these tears from those sweet azure eyes! Little dear innocent; Good God, how could I have done this!"—and then the strange impulsive creature herself sobbed and wept even more convulsively and bitterly than the child.

The latter now threw its little arms round the neck of the female who pressed the child again and again to her bosom, until in a few minutes the little one sank off into slumber; and then Mademoiselle Imogene gently open the door and conveyed Annie up to a neatly furnished chamber overhead, and where there was a little bedstead by the side of a larger one. Upon the snowy

quilt of the little bedstead did Mademoiselle Imogene softly lay the child, at the same time tenderly yet cautiously pressing her lips to its cheek. Then descending from the chamber she rang the parlour bell: and a neatly dressed, respectable-looking servant-woman, about thirty years of age, answered the summons.

"I have taken little Annie upstairs," said Mademoiselle Imogene, "and have laid her down. Go and stay with her till she awakes, and then put her to bed. Ah! and here is a nice piece of cake for her; and—and—you may tell her that to-morrow she shall be sure to have a new doll."

It was by means of these lavish ing demonstrations of kindness towards the child, that this female of strange impulses endeavoured to atone for that momentary paroxysm of rage which had almost seemed to be replete with a bitter burning hatred towards the object of these marvellous inconsistencies.

Fanny, the servant-woman, hastened upstairs to sit with the child; and Mademoiselle Imogene glanced at a clock which was ticking at the end of the passage. The dusk was now closing in: it was only just light enough for her to distinguish how the hands pointed upon the dial; and she mentally ejaculated, "It is nearly time to set out."

At that moment a low double knock at the front door reached the young female's ears.

"I will answer it, Fanny," she said, thus speaking up the staircase to the servant. "I dare say it is one of the young ladies of the establishment."

The front door was opened;

and a lady, closely veiled, appeared upon the threshold. She was dressed with the utmost plainness; and the black veil was so folded and so retained over her countenance that it was impossible to catch the slightest glimpse of that face, especially with the dusk closing in. But that she was no ordinary person, was evident from the style in which her apparel was fashioned and worn, as well as from a certain air of distinction in the gait and carriage which were no doubt habitual. Mademoiselle Imogene had a quick eye; and it was therefore at a glance that she discerned this much in reference to the fine tall form of her veiled visitress.

But the visitress herself seemed to be transfixed with astonishment on beholding the fantastically dressed female by whom the door was opened; and not a syllable came from her lips.

"Whom did you want?" Mademoiselle at length asked, in a courteous tone; and her voice was singularly soft and pleasing.

"I—I beg your pardon," faltered forth the lady, who seemed to be almost overwhelmed with confusion: "but I fear that—that I must have made some mistake. Perhaps those whom I sought are gone to live elsewhere——"

"Or perhaps, madam, you have come into the wrong street—or if the right street, to the wrong house?" and Mademoiselle Imogene spoke with the utmost courtesy, because she felt more than ever convinced by the speech and manner of the veiled visitress that she was indeed a well-bred lady.

"No—this is the street and this is the number of the house," said the latter: "but still—I am sure

—at least, I think that those whom I seek can be no longer here.”

“Whom do you expect to find here?” inquired Mademoiselle Imogene.

The veiled stranger continued silent for nearly a minute: she seemed to be hesitating whether she should give a reply; and at length she timidly and falteringly said, “Some people of the name of Hartland used to reside here.”

“Walk in, madam,” exclaimed Mademoiselle Imogene. “I see that your business lies with me.”

The stranger-lady again appeared to hesitate: then as if suddenly making up her mind, she crossed the threshold: but scarcely had she done this, when evidently seized with a fresh fit of irresolution, she made a movement as if to beat a retreat.

“Come, madam,” exclaimed the fantastically-dressed female, in an impatient tone, “for heaven’s sake make up your mind one way or another. This hesitation on your part is but little courteous to me, as if you fancied that you were invited to enter a house where your person would be scarcely safe. As for your character, whether it might suffer or not, can assuredly be of little moment, inasmuch as you wear that thick black veil as its defence-work.”

“But tell me—tell me,” said the lady, in a low and faint voice, “what have you to do with the family of Hartland?”

“My name is Hartland,” was the reply: and the speaker’s voice became courteous once more.

“You—you a Hartland,” said the lady, in scarcely articulate accents and she staggered: visi-

bly under the influence of some strong emotions which were overpowering her. “Is it possible—you—in this garb? My God!”—and she suddenly burst into tears.

For a moment Mademoiselle Imogene was about to explode in a violent fit of indignation: but all of a sudden a suspicion of some kind struck her—a light seemed to flash in unto her mind; and she said in a quick tone, “Walk in, madam—walk in. If you are afraid of the darkness I will soon procure a light—though something tells me that *you* need not be afraid to be with *me*.”

“No—I am not afraid,” said the veiled lady, suddenly recovering her self-position—or at all events a sufficiency of it to enable her to decide upon the course which she should pursue. “Lead the way. I follow.”

Mademoiselle Imogene closed the front door, and conducted her veiled visitress into the parlour. There she at once lighted a couple of candles, and courteously bade the stranger lady to be seated,—at the same time setting the example.

There was a silence of upwards of a minute, during which the veiled lady was evidently surveying the fantastically clad female with the utmost attention; and then it was equally visible that through the thick folds of her veil she slowly sent her regards travelling round the neatly furnished parlour. Mademoiselle Imogene watched her narrowly, but with a seeming carelessness, as if she were waiting in a sort of easy indifference for the moment when it might please her visitress to

enter into further explanations.

"And your name is Hartland!" the latter at length broke silence, but without making the slightest movement towards withdrawing her veil; and it also struck Mademoiselle Imogene that she was speaking in a feigned tone.

"Yes—my name is Hartland," replied the young female.

"Miss Hartland therefore, I presume?" was the next query.

"Yes—Miss Hartland, was the response.

"But the rest of the family—your father—your mother—your brother——"

"My father and my mother," said Imogen Hartland—for such was really her name—"are dead."

"Dead?" ejaculated the veiled lady. "How long have they been dead?"

"Two years have elapsed," responded Imogen, "since they both perished within the same week, of the fever that ravaged this neighbourhood. As for my brother——"

"Did he die too?" asked the veiled lady; "how many died within this house?" she demanded in accents which denoted a feverish anxiety.

"Only two died within these walls," answered Imogen,— "my father and my mother. My brother has gone to sea; for we were left in poverty."

"Poverty?" echoed the veiled lady; and she started and shuddered visibly as she spoke the word.

"Yes—poverty," said Imogen. "My father had been foolish enough to speculate with some money that he had; and the worst of it was that the money

could scarcely be called his own—as perhaps you, madam, have already more than conjectured.

"I?"—and the veiled lady gave another start more abrupt than the former one.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Imogen, with a tone and manner of easy carelessness. "Proceed, madam. You shall continue to be the questioner.

"Your brother, you say, has gone to sea?" continued the veiled lady. "And you——"

"Oh, surely you can see what I am," ejaculated Miss Hartland, with a smile that seemed to be good-humoured, but which notwithstanding might have a tincture of bitterness in it. "Perhaps you may have heard of me? There is my portrait. My real name is Imogen: but when I first entered the Circus, the manager struck an e on the name—put a *Mademoiselle* before it—and coolly announced me as the celebrated Mademoiselle Imogene of Franconi's in Paris, although there perhaps never was any Mademoiselle Imogene there at all, but still more certain that I myself never was there. However, the thing took; and hundreds came every night to see Mademoiselle Imogene who would never so much as traverse the street much less cross Westminster Bridge to see plain Miss Hartland."

"Do—do I understand you right?" said the lady, who spoke as if she were gasping and half-suffocating behind her veil—"do I understand you right—that—that—you are an equestrian performer at Astley's Circus?"

"That is exactly, madam, what I am," replied Miss Hart-

land, with a cool easy off-handedness of tone and manner. "I am a great favourite at the amphitheatre. This is my principal character," she continued, glancing down at her costume, "I perform the part of a Greek bandit pursued by a host of troops. Of course I fly before them. I am a sort of female Dick Turpin for the nonce and I light a cigarette, which I smoke while standing upright on my horse with an air of cool unconcern, although the animal is galloping round the circus at the height of its speed, just as if it were really over the plains of Greece."

"And therefore," murmured the veiled lady, "you are well paid doubtless."

"Oh, well paid indeed!" laughed Imogen, displaying two rows of brilliant teeth: "who ever heard of people in our profession being well paid? But so long as I can keep a roof over my head and maintain those who are dependent upon me, I care not. Three guineas a week do not go very far; and yet they accomplish all that I need for the present?"

"Ah!" said the lady; "those who are dependent upon you? Then you mean perhaps—you mean——"

"My servant for instance," replied Imogen,—“a worthy creature who has lived for the last ten years beneath this roof. And then too——”

"And then too?" repeated the lady. "You were about to say——"

"Hark!" ejaculated Imogen, rising from her seat and opening the parlour door. "There is another who is dependent upon me!"—for little Annie, having

now awakened up, was crying—though she soon ceased when the good-hearted Fanny placed a piece of cake in her little hand.

"Good evening, Miss Hartland—good evening—I must go," said the lady. "Another time I will come and call upon you—to-morrow evening perhaps—You may think my conduct strange——"

"So strange," interjected Imogen, "that I do not choose to put up with it:"—and at once closing the parlour door, she placed her back against it.

"Good heavens! what do you mean?" murmured the veiled lady, tottering back two or three paces as if she had been stricken a blow. "You bar my way? Oh, let me depart, I beseech you! Ah, I forgot it was my intention to offer you my purse Miss Hartland! But my brain is so confused——"

"Sit down and compose yourself," said Imogen coolly. "You and I will not part thus. You have had your turn as questioner: it is now for me to have mine. Tell me therefore——"

"Ask me nothing now!" cried the lady entreatingly: "ask me nothing now! I am not equal to the scene! I have mistrusted my own powers—But I will come to you to-morrow——"

"What guarantee have I for that?" demanded Imogen. "I know you not——"

"Guarantee?"—and now the fine form of the veiled lady was drawn up to its full height; and though the countenance was concealed, yet did the keen-witted Imogen full easily comprehend how a haughty indignation had suddenly inspired her visitress.

"Ah! you must be some great

lady!" ejaculated Imogen,—
 "greater perhaps than I could
 possibly have suspected! But
 we will see."

The little supple form of the equestrian actress bounded forward—the clutch upon that dark veil with her long taper fingers was made in the twinkling of an eye—and as a shriek rang from the lips behind it, it was torn away from the countenance which it had concealed. And Ah! what a beautiful face was this that was now disclosed to the daring Imogen,—who, dropping the veil in all the wild amazement of a most unexpected recognition, ejaculated, "Good heavens! is it possible? The brilliant Duchess?"

"Silence, woman! silence!" said the Duchess—for such indeed was the exalted rank of the lady who had come so mysteriously to that house. "Silence!"—and she spoke in a voice that was hoarse with mingled rage and terror.

"I have no wish to expose your Grace—no wish to betray you," replied Imogen, who, having recovered from her astonishment, now displayed a calm self-possession. "You and I understand each other thoroughly. When shall I see your Grace again?"

"Soon—very shortly—in a day or two—I will write and let you know," faltered forth the Duchess, as she stooped to pick up the veil.

"At your Grace's own leisure. It is of no consequence to me, now that I have discovered——"

"Enough! enough!" interjected the young Duchess; for the age of this beautiful patrician lady did not exceed five-and-twenty.

"But, Ah! I had forgotten something. My purse——"

"Keep it, lady—keep it!" cried Imogen, almost disdainfully. "It is not thus that I am to be treated. I am no mean-spirited covetous wretch to be bribed into keeping a secret or to have a purse tossed to me as if it were a sop. But I act upon principle; and so long as I receive fair treatment from others, my own demeanour is equally candid and generous in return. Your Grace now understands me."

"Singular being that you are!" exclaimed the Duchess, gazing with interest and almost with admiration upon the female in the fantastic dress who stood before her.

The next instant the Duchess against adjusted the evil over her countenance. Imogen opened the door—and the patrician lady quitted the house. The moment she was gone, Imogen threw a capacious mantle over her shoulders, and made the best of her way to Astley's theatre,—entering it by means of the stage door, which was only a minute's walk from her own abode.

CHAPTER II.

THE COTTAGE.

THE scene now shifts to a beautiful little village at no great distance from Tunbridge Wells in Kent; as we have certain reasons for concealing the real name of that village, we will, with the reader's permission, denominate it Addington. Our story, both as it relates to the preceding chap-

ter and the present one, opens in the month of April, 1847. Nothing could be more delightful than the picture presented by the rural scene of Addington and its neighbourhood when the trees were putting forth their verdure and when the hand of Nature was beginning to scatter flowers upon the meadows and on the outskirts of the groves.

A little way apart from the group of houses forming the village of Addington, stood a cottage in the midst of a pleasant garden, which was fronted with palings and had the remaining sides protected by high hedges. Nothing could be more picturesque than the spot which we are describing, with a crystal streamlet meandering and murmuring at a little distance on one side and the grey old tower of the village-church peeping up above the yew-trees at a little distance on the other side.

It was at about five o'clock in the evening, that a tall handsome young man, whose age might be about six or seven-and-twenty, alighted from a coach which plying between Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells, passed through Addinton. Hastily he bent his way towards the cottage which we have just been describing; and there was the animation of joy upon his countenance as if he expected to behold those who were dear to him. A very few minutes and he reached the garden-gate, when with a cry of delight a beautiful creature of about eighteen came rushing forth to welcome him.

"Alfred! dearest Alfred! you have returned at last!" he cried as he folded her in his arms.

"Yes, dearest Ethel," he said; "punctual to the day, and almost to the hour of my promise! A fortnight's absence—Oh, how long it has seemed! But where is our dear babe?"

At this moment a neatly dressed nursery-maid appeared from the cottage porch, bearing in her arms an infant about ten months old: and as the father, taking it for a few minutes from the attendant, fondled it with every evidence of the most doting love, the young mother looked on with tears in her eyes. But Ah! though all tears are alike, yet from what different sources may they flow!—and these tears which now bedewed the peach-like cheeks of the charming Ethel had their origin in a fount of purest rapture.

We may avail ourselves of this opportunity to observe that Ethel had dark hair floating in rich redundancy over her shoulders—that her eyes were hazel, calm and soft in their expression—and that her figure was admirably modelled. Her looks were replete with innocence and artlessness, as if in becoming a wife she had not lost any of the ingenuousness of girlhood, and as if all her ideas of happiness were now centred in her husband and her infant boy. And well might she be proud as well as fond of him who had just returned to strain her to his breast: for not only was he exceedingly handsome, but he possessed fascinating manners, a distinguished appearance, and a well-cultivated intellect.

"I should have been with you, dearest Ethel," he said, "some hours earlier to-day, only that I waited at Maidstone to perform

a promise which I made you some little time ago. Do you not recollect, dear Ethel——”

“Oh, I can have no thought for anything now,” she cried, “except the enthusiastic joy which I experience at your return!”

Alfred threw his arm round the beautiful form of his wife; and as he thus strolled with her through the garden; he went on to say, “You remember, dearest I promised that we should enjoy equestrian exercise the moment the fine weather set in. Oh, it will be so pleasant to ride together amidst the shady lanes and through the wheat-fields in the cool summer evenings!”

“Oh delightful!” exclaimed Ethel clapping her fair white hands with joy. I now know what you mean dear Alfred! You have been buying some horses at Maidstone?”

“Yes—and I am convinced that you will be pleased with the one I have procured for you. It is the most beautiful creature that ever carried a lady; and you, dear Ethel, will look charming upon its back!”

Alfred Trevor contemplated his lovely companion with the tenderest admiration as he thus spoke and his eyes beamed with delight as he thought how elegant and graceful would be her appearance in a riding-habit setting off the contours of her symmetrical shape. and with a plumed hat decorating the beautiful head. But all of a sudden some other thought of a very different nature appeared to intrude itself upon that delicious reverie, as if some demon had suddenly flitted athwart the heaven of his imagination; for an expres-

sion of indescribable anguish shot over his countenance, and he had only just time to avert it to prevent the gentle Ethel from being shocked and horrified by the view thereof.

“Ah,” he ejaculated, finding himself compelled to snatch up some excuse for thus abruptly turning away from her; “how beautifully some of these flowers have come out during my absence!”

“And I have watched them with care and interest,” replied Ethel, whose voice was of silvery clearness, and pure as the rows of pearly teeth between which came the fragrant breath that wafted those dulcet sounds—“I have watched them with care and interest, because I knew that you would admire them when you returned home. Ah! and now, my dear Alfred, I hope that you are going to make a long stay with me before you go away again—though of course I know that your business must be attended to—and all the more so,” she added, with a sweet smile and a fond look, “if you indulge me in such extravagant whims as that which you have this day gratified.”

“Nay, dear Ethel,” responded Alfred, “it was no whim of yours—it was an offer which I spontaneously made, and which resolved itself into a promise that has now been kept. Ah! by the bye! reverting to these new purchases, I should inform you that I heard of them quite by accident. I travelled a short distance in a coach with a person who turned out to be a horse-dealer—a Mr. Manning of Maidstone—and he had to sell some horses for a military gentleman

who it appears has been a little extravagant of late: but Manning would not mention his name. However, I bought the best two animals of the stud; and I gave them in charge to a person to bring them over. They ought to be here by this time."

Scarcely had Alfred Trevor spoken these words when the sounds of horses' hoofs might be heard approaching; and again winding his arm about the waist of the beautiful Ethel, he hurried her towards the gate. In a very few moments the horses made their appearance, in the charge of the Maidstone groom to whom they had been entrusted. Ethel was delighted by the appearance of the beautiful creature purchased for herself; and she also admired the one which Alfred was to ride in company with her.

"And now, my man," said Alfred, putting a guinea into the groom's hand, "this is in addition to what I have already given you for the care with which you have brought the horses over. Take them up to the Red Lion for me, and let them be put into the stables there until I can make other arrangements."

The man took the guinea and touched his hat. But he did not immediately ride off; he fidgeted with his whip, and looked as if he had something to say.

"Well, what is it, my man?" demanded Alfred. "Are you not contented with what I have given you?"

"Oh, perfectly so sir," was the response. "Only——"

"Only what?" ejaculated Trevor, impatiently. "Perhaps you want to ask me whether I am suited with a groom?"

"No, sir—'twas not exactly that—indeed nothing near like it. But I want to say summut to you sir: only"—and he glanced at Ethel.

"This lady is my wife," cried Alfred; "you may speak before her. If there is anything wrong about the horses and if I have been at all deceived——"

"No, no, sir—it's not that!" interjected the groom. "I'll just take up the horses to the Red Lion; and if so be, sir, you'll be disengaged for a few minutes when I come back——"

"Yes, yes! Away with you"—and then, as the groom rode off, Alfred said to Ethel, "These fellows are never satisfied; for although he says he is, you may depend upon it he has yet something in his mind by which he hopes to extort another guinea or two out of me."

A neatly-attired and pretty-looking parlour-maid now appeared from the cottage porch, to announce that dinner was served up; and Alfred conducted his wife into the dwelling. They sat down to table together; and half-an-hour passed, during which the groom was forgotten. At length the man was seen entering the gate; and Alfred exclaimed, "By heaven, my tormentor! But I will soon go and get rid of him."

He hastened out into the garden; and stopping the groom, said, "Come now, my good fellow, what is it that you want with me?"

"Beg pardon, sir," was the response, accompanied by a touch of the hat, "but you've behaved so like a gentelman to me that I should be sorry to see you get into any trouble——"

"Trouble?" echoed Alfred.
 "What do you mean?"

"Why, sir, about that cheque—"

"The cheque? Ah!"—and for a moment Alfred changed colour.
 "Come now, explain yourself—and tell me exactly what you *do* mean."

"Why, sir, just as I was coming out of Maidston with them horses," continued the groom, "who should I meet but Mr. Manning the dealer. He didn't know anything of me before; but seeing the horses, he cries out, 'Well, so you're taking them home, and you must be careful with them, for it's a long distance——'"

"Ah! he said that—did he?" interjected Alfred, whose countenance now wore an uneasy expression. "But go on. What followed?"

"'No, sir,' says I to Mr. Manning, 'it's by no means a long distance, a matter of some dozen miles from Maidstone to Addington.'—Then you should have seen, sir, how queer Manning looked: but I didn't know that I had done any harm——"

"Well, well!" interrupted Alfred, with increasing nervousness. "Proceed, proceed! What followed? I suppose Manning asked you where you were going to take the horses?"

"Well, he did, sir; and I told him to a Mr. Trevor's. I believe that was right, sir—and you gave me that name?"

"I did. And what then?"

"Manning looked astounded; and clapping his hands on his breeches' pocket, he cried out—But saving your presence, Mr. Trevor——"

"Go on!—go on!" exclaimed Alfred, with an increasing excite-

ment. "What was it that Manning cried out?"

"That the cheque you had given him," responded the groom, diffidently and hesitatingly,—"*I don't like to say it, sir—but if I must—well then—*Mr. Manning cries out, 'By God, I'm done! and the cheque's a forgery!'"

"My heavens!" ejaculated Alfred, smitten with consternation: "what if he should come here?"

"No—he will not come here, sir," said the groom; "because he's gone up to London to present the cheque at the banker's."

"Ah!" and it was with a sigh of ineffable relief that the exclamation came forth from the breast of Alfred Trevor.

"Why, you see sir," continued the groom, "I represented to Mr. Manning that you didn't look like a swindler, but that you must be a gentleman every inch of you; cos why says I——"

"Did he say anything more about the cheque?" demanded Alfred quickly.

"He only said, sir, that 'twas signed in quite another name from the one I'd mentioned to him: for he didn't seem to know that you was Mr. Trevor at all."

"Well—and did he mention *that other name*?" asked Alfred, still with nervous quickness.

"No, sir—he didn't mention it and so in course I didn't ask him. But as I was saying," continued the groom, "I represented to Mr. Manning that you must be a thorough gentleman out and out, for that you comes to me and you says, says you, 'If you'll take them horses over to Dahlia Cottage at Addington for Mr.

Trevor, here's a five pun' note for your trouble. And so Mr. Manning says, says he 'Well, at all events we know where the horses are going; and if everything should be right, after all, I should be sorry to have kicked up a bobbery about the business; and so I'll risk it this far, that I'll go up to London at once and present the cheque for a hundred and eighty guineas; and if it's all right well and good; and if not, why then there'll be plenty of time to take out a warrant.'—So then away cuts Manning in one direction, and away comes I in t'other with the horses."

"And that was all that passed?" inquired Alfred.

"Why, not exactly, sir," responded the groom: "for Mr. Manning tips me half a guinea, telling me not to say a word to you that he had questioned me on the point. But you see, sir, I thought you was a genelman—"

"Enough, my man!" exclaimed Trevor. "There is another guinea for your trouble; and now, mind you don't say a word to a soul about all these things. I shall be over in Maidstone again in a few days; and if I find that you have not said anything, depend upon it I shall not forget to reward you."

"You may rely upon me, sir,"—and again pulling his forelock—for the groom had stood hat in hand the whole time he was talking to Trevor, with the respect due to one who scattered his money about with no niggard hand—he took his departure.

As Trevor turned hurriedly away, the bitter anguished expression again swept across his

handsome countenance, completely distorting for a moment those features of perfect masculine beauty; and he almost wrung his hands in despair as he mentally ejaculated, "Oh, my poor Ethel! Oh! my poor innocent babe Alfred!"

He, however, quickly composed his looks, and retraced his way into the elegantly-furnished little dining-room. Good heaven! what a spectacle met his view! Upon the carpet lay Ethel, white as marble. Was she dead? or was she only in a swoon? Half frantic, he flew towards her, and raised that inanimate form in his arms.

"Thank God, she breathes!" he exclaimed: and he hastened to sprinkle water upon her face.

He comprehended it all. The window was open; but it was concealed by evergreens from his view on the spot where he had conversed with the Maidstone groom, so that he had failed to observe at the time how it was possible for their colloquy to meet the ears of Ethel, whom he had left at the table. Oh, what agony of mind did that young man then experience!—and how far more anguished even than before was the expression of mingled horror and despair which swept across his countenance!

Ethel opened her large hazel eyes. For a moment she smiled in fondness as her regards met his looks; and then, as if smitten with a sudden hideous recollection, she became dismayed and affrighted—and in a suffocating gasping voice, she said, "Oh, Alfred! Alfred! what was it that I heard?"

"Nothing, nothing, dearest!

—a mistake! It was nothing but a mistake!"

"O God! *forgery!*" and the unhappy creature shivered and shuddered and literally writhed convulsively in his arms; then with that sudden inspiration of fondness which ever impels a loving woman under such circumstances she flung her arms about his neck, crying "Oh, my dearest husband! do not deceive me! If there be any reason—Ah, I will not speak what I mean—but you will understand me when I say that no matter what you may be or what you may have done, I will ever cling to you—Oh, yes! all the more closely!"

"Ethel, Ethel! you are driving me mad!" exclaimed Trevor. "I have done nothing wrong! No, no!—fear nothing, my angel!"

"Alas, dearest Alfred!" she said, shaking her head mournfully; "it seems as if a veil had suddenly fallen from mine eyes!—a thousand circumstances now surge up in my memory to make me apprehend a thousand evils!"

"This is foolish, Ethel! Oh, this is foolish!" ejaculated Trevor vehemently.

"Oh, do not be angry, dearest husband!" she resumed, now lavishing upon him the tenderest caresses: "but you know my fondness—and hence you may appreciate my fears! Relieve me therefore of my doubts! Why those constant absences from home? Why the mystery that envelopes our union? why have I never been presented to your family? And Oh! why, why should you who are evidently so well off, bury me—aye, and bury yourself too when you are with

me—in this comparatively humble cottage?"

"I thought, Ethel," answered Trevor reproachfully, that you were contented to live with me anywhere, no matter how secluded the spot—how humble the home!"

"Heaven knows that I am thus contented!" replied the young lady, smiling and weeping beneath the joint conflicting influences of her fondness and of her affliction. "It is not that I wish to change! But this occurrence has put such strange wild fears into my head—it has all in a moment made things which were apparently natural and consistent before, seem so strange and inconsistent—"

"You ask me, Ethel, relative to my frequent absences," responded Trevor: "you ask me concerning my family—you ask me why, having money at my command; I bury myself with you in a retirement like this. Have you never before received from me explanations on these points? Have I not told you that I am connected with a mercantile firm on behalf of which I am compelled to travel frequently throughout all the English counties—to Scotland and to Ireland—and sometimes even to Paris! Moreover, have I not assured you that I possess no near relatives who care for me nor whose friendship you would value; but only distant kinsmen, of cold and proud dispositions—worldly-minded and selfish—whose only ideas of happiness are associated with money, and who could not be made to understand or believe that I am in the enjoyment of an almost perfect felicity with a wife whose beauty and virtue con-

stitute her only dower. Do you desire to be presented to such relatives as these? Then, in respect to the retirement in which we live, is it not the happiest mode of existence? Suppose that I took you to the metropolis—that I there hired a fine house and gave entertainments,—would you be happier if we were thus lost as it were to each other in the midst of crowded rooms, than we are when alone together in the retirement of this cottage? And think you, Ethel, that it would be pleasing to my feelings to behold you whirling round in the dance, with your waist clasped by some mawkish dandy, intolerable fop, or notorious profligate? or would you be altogether satisfied if you beheld me bestowing my attentions no one of those modern *belles* who drag out a sort of artificial existence in the sickly atmosphere of fashionable society,—one of those women whose faces are enamelled with hardihood, and the freshness of whose youth, though they themselves be yet young, is for ever gone!

“Enough, enough, Alfred!” ejaculated Ethel, as she clung far more fondly than ever to her husband. “I do not wish to go into that society which you thus depict in such forcible colours! And, Oh! forgive me, my dear Alfred, for having expressed doubts, or hinted at misgivings, or seeming to have required explanations! But Ah! the words that I overheard—”

“Ethel,” interrupted Alfred, solemnly, “listen to me for a moment. Have I ever deceived you? Look back over the two years which have elapsed since first we met amidst the wild and

grand scenery of Dorsetshire; and tell me whether you have ever known me to give utterance to a falsehood? Will you not therefore now believe me when I declare that everything connected with the communication made by that groom was an error and a mistake?”

“I am sure that you have never deceived me, dearest husband,” answered Ethel: “every promise you ever made you have fulfilled! But, Ah! I know how much you love me; and I fear—Oh! I fear that if there were anything disagreeable, you would do all that you could to conceal it, and you would say the most consoling things to me—and—and—out of actual kindness you might deceive me!”

For an instant Alfred made an impatient gesture; and then, with a quick revulsion of feeling straining his beautiful wife to his breast, he exclaimed, “Well, well—it is natural, Ethel, that you should have been annoyed and rendered uneasy by the untoward incident which has arisen. Not for worlds would I leave a restless suspicion floating in your mind. It is the dearest wish of my heart that you should continue to enjoy the calm serene happiness which you have hitherto experienced. To-morrow, therefore, you shall accompany me to London; and I will afford you the most convincing proof, not merely that the mention of the word forgery in connection with my name is as ridiculous as it is outrageous, but that the sources of my income are most honourable and legitimate!”

“A thousand thanks, dearest

husband, for this proposition, so kind—so considerate!" exclaimed Ethel. "But I will not accept it!—for it would imply suspicion and mistrust; and Oh! to suspect or mistrust you—no, never! never!"

Alfred reflected for a few instants; and he said to himself, "Yes—it were better that I should take this step; or else on every future occasion the slightest incident will be rendering her uneasy and mistrustful!—Yes, dearest Ethel," he continued, addressing himself to her, "it shall be as I have said! And now no more upon the subject."

He embraced her affectionately; and for the remainder of that evening she was as gay and happy as her disposition was naturally wont to be; for she entertained not the slightest doubt that it was indeed an error and a mistake of some sort or another which had produced so much uneasiness.

On the following day Alfred and Ethel Trevor took their seats in a postchaise procured from the Red Lion; and they proceeded to London. Ethel had been in the metropolis before; and therefore the spectacle of the crowded Babylon was not new to her, though it was interesting, as it must ever be to those habitually dwellers in the country, who visit it but rarely. They alighted from the vehicle at an hotel at Charing Cross; but without tarrying there longer than was necessary to obtain some refreshment, Alfred Trevor gave his arm to Ethel and conducted her to a celebrated banking-house in the Strand. The moment they crossed the threshold, Trevor whispered to

Ethel, "Remain here an instant!"—and he passed into a parlour at the back part of the premises.

In less than a minute he returned, and again giving his arm to Ethel, he conducted her into that parlour. There a short, elderly, bald-headed gentleman was seated at a table strown with letters and other documents; and at once rising from his chair, he bowed politely to Ethel.

"I know that your time is valuable," said Alfred: "and therefore I am not going to occupy it for more than two minutes. In the first place just satisfy me—will you?—that the cheque for one hundred and eighty guineas which I gave to Manning, the Maidstone hore-dealer, has been paid."

"No doubt of it," answered the elderly gentleman—and he quitted the parlour: then almost immediately returning with a huge account-book, he opened it at a particular page, and said "The cheque was presented and paid this morning. Will you have the cheque itself?"

"Oh, by no means!" answered Alfred. "Let me see? How long have I banked at your establishment? I mean I myself—individually. I am not alluding to my family——"

"The account was first opened in your name about three years ago," replied the elderly gentleman.

"Have the kindness to give me a blank cheque," said Alfred.

This request was immediately complied with: and he proceeded to fill it up at a desk which was so situated that while he was writing his back was turned towards Ethel.

"Now," he said, "I must

trouble you to procure me the amount for this. It is for five thousand pounds."

Ethel started; and she could scarcely keep back a cry of astonishment. Indeed, at the moment she was half inclined to fancy that the elderly gentleman would be taken quite aback by such a demand. But this individual continued perfectly calm and unruffled; and receiving the cheque, he again issued from the parlour. Ethel cast a look of bewildered inquiry upon Alfred, who smiled confidently, but said nothing. The bald-headed gentleman very speedily returned, and handed Trevor five bank-notes, each for a thousand pounds. Ethel felt as if she were in the midst of a dream; and the parlour, with the table and desk, and the little bald-headed gentleman, appeared to be whirling round and round. It was the same with the public part of the bank, as Alfred led her through it; and the sounds of chinking gold mingled with the buzz of voices in a manner that only seemed to increase the confusion of her brain. It was not until she again found herself in the street that the dreamy feeling of hallucination quitted her, and that she became conscious of the reality of the whole proceedings.

"Ah, dearest Alfred," she murmured, "it must indeed have been most painful to you to have been mistrusted and suspected yesterday, not only by others, but by your own wife! Now that I am so perfectly convinced of the prosperity of your position, I am happy—Oh, so happy! I felt as if my form were as light as the elastic air itself—

and that I could spring up into it!"

Alfred flung upon her a smile of mingled tenderness and pride; and then stopping an unoccupied hackneycab that was passing, he handed her into it. His instructions were given to the driver, and the vehicle proceeded into the City. In due time it stopped at an office in the immediate neighbourhood of the Bank of England; and Alfred, leaping out, left Ethel alone in the vehicle for a minute or two while he entered the office. On reappearing, he said to her, "Come, dearest—alight. Mr. Warren is disengaged."

"And who is Mr. Warren?" inquired Ethel.

"A stockbroker," was the reply,—"a gentleman who transacts all kinds of business in respect to money."

The office was entered; and Mr. Warren—a tall, goodlooking, elegantly-dressed man whose age was under thirty—bowed most courteously to Ethel as Alfred presented him to her.

"Pray be seated, Mrs. Trevor," he said: "the business will not occupy a long time."

"Here is the money," said Alfred; and he handed the five bank notes to Mr. Warren, who immediately quitted the office.

"These stockbrokers, said Alfred to Ethel, when they were alone together, "make a great deal of money. Here is Mr. Warren—a single man, with a splendid house at Highbury, his hunters and his yacht, his shooting-box down in the country—and yet scarcely able to spend all the money he makes!"

"And what has he gone to do with *your* money?" inquired

Ethel.

"With mine?" ejaculated Alfred. "With yours, you mean! Yes, dearest—he has gone to place that sum of five thousand pounds in the Bank of England in your name: so that if anything should prematurely happen to me—for of course we are all mortal—you and our dear little Alfred will be provided for. Not but that I hope to leave you a large fortune," added Alfred with the sudden quickness of an after thought.

The tears were streaming down Ethel's cheeks; and with mingled smiles and sobs she flung her arms about his neck. She had scarcely composed her feelings when Mr. Warren re-entered the office.

"The money is duly invested," he said, "in your name, madam; and here is the Bank receipt."

"Put it in an envelope," ejaculated Trevor, "and seal it. It will be safer so."

Mr. Warren did as he was requested; and when the envelope was duly sealed with a ring which he took from his finger, he presented the packet to Ethel saying, "This is yours, madam."

She took it; and in a few moments she was again seated with her husband in the vehicle, which retraced its way towards the West End. The hotel where the postchaise had been left, was reached—the equipage was soon in readiness—and by five o'clock in the evening Alfred Trevor and the beautiful Ethel were again at Dahlia Cottage in the picturesque village of Addington.

"Now, my dearest wife," whispered Alfred, when they had embraced their infant, "go and secure that packet in some safe

place. And remember—remember, dearest Ethel, the solemn injunction which I now give you—that you never open that packet until I shall be no more!"

Having thus spoken, he hastily turned away and walked forth into the garden; while Ethel ascending to her chamber, consigned the sealed packet to a place of security.

Meanwhile her husband sought an arbour at the extremity of the garden and rushing into that shaded retreat, he threw himself upon the bench, murmuring in accents of despair, "My God! What stratagems! what subterfuges! Oh, that I dared fling myself at her feet and tell her everything!"

CHAPTER III.

THORNBURY PARK.

THE scene now changes to a noble country-seat called Thornbury Park, and situated in one of the most beautiful parts of Buckinghamshire.

It was evening; and a flood of lustre streamed from the array of windows belonging to the spacious drawing-room; for there were many guests on this occasion at Thornbury. The moon was shining brightly in company with legions of brilliant stars, so that the argentine beams descending from heaven's canopy, mingled with the roseate effulgence flowing forth from the gilded saloon.

It was the last day of April; and therefore scarcely a week had elapsed since the occurrences which we have related in the

preceding chapters. The weather was more than usually warm for that season of the year; there was not the slightest chill in the evening air—but just a sufficient freshness to prevent the atmosphere from being sluggish or oppressive. Some of the guests began to stroll forth from the mansion into the spacious gardens; and they soon scattered themselves in the different avenues.

And presently the mistress of that palatial dwelling imitated the example set by majority of her guests and came forth likewise. The reader already knows her:—she was the handsome Duchess who paid so mysterious a visit to the abode of Imogen Hartland. She now appeared in evening toilet, which displayed her fine shape to the fullest advantage. Her carriage was not stately nor her mien imposing; but better still, the former was elegant and the latter engaging. She had evidently no more pride about her than that which properly belonged to her sex, apart from the social rank which she occupied. But exceedingly beautiful was she; and hence in fashionable society she was usually known as “The Brilliant Duchess.” If a newspaper paragraph, while recording any circumstances connected with high life, simply mentioned “The Duchess,” without giving her the rest of her title, everybody knew who was meant. People spoke of “*The Duchess*” as if there were only one lady of that exalted dignity in the land—while in reality it was because this particular Duchess was held paramount over the rest. Often too she was spoken of as “The

Young Duchess;” for whereas her age was only five-and-twenty, she was actually the youngest lady who bore a ducal rank.

Yes—exceedingly beautiful was she, with her lightbrown hair rendered lustrous by the moonbeams, and with her pure complexion seeming all the fairer and more brilliant in the chaste halo which the heaven shed around her. As a flower sits gracefully on its stalk, so was the well-shaped head poised upon an arching neck, which rose up from a bust of grand development. The waist was slender; the arms, bare to the shoulders with the evening toilette, were modelled to a statuesque perfection. Her eyes were of a clear liquid blue—not nearly so deep as the violet; indeed, they were only a shade darker than the azure of that heaven from which the flood of silver light was pouring down upon her. The expression of those eyes can only be defined by blending the ideas of softness and animation—of clear brilliancy and of limpid calmness. The mouth was beautifully formed; the teeth were like rows of ivory; and the softly rounded chin completed the oval of the countenance of transcendent loveliness.

She came not forth alone from the mansion, to ramble through the gardens. She was accompanied by the gentleman of elegant appearance, and who was dressed in the most fashionable style, yet with the best possible taste. He was very handsome; and his slender form was well proportioned. He had light hair that curled naturally; and a moustache somewhat concea-

led the strength of passion which would otherwise have displayed itself in the curving voluptuousness of the mouth. His age was about six or seven and twenty: he was a Baronet—and he held a position as a Captain in the Guards, with the rank therefore of Lieutenant-Colonel. He was unmarried, and had the general repute of being very gay and of loving pleasure; while amongst those who knew him most intimately, he bore the character of a successful libertine. He belonged to an old family; but from various circumstances it had been getting poorer and poorer for the last two centuries—so that it was but a very moderate fortune which descended to Sir Abel Kingston, the personage of whom we are writing.

Such was the individual who escorted the young Duchess forth from the mansion. She did not lean upon his arm; he had offered it—but she had declined to accept it; and silence reigned between them for several minutes as they descended a flight of marble steps leading down from a noble terrace to the walks and avenues of the garden, where splendid statues constituted no mean features of attraction. Everything was magnificent in reference to the old mansion of Thornbury—the gardens, the park, and the other pleasure grounds attached to it; and as the mistress of such a charming country seat—possessing a habitation of corresponding splendour in London—and married to a man only a little older than herself, and as handsome as she was beautiful,—one would have fancied that there was every

reason why the young Duchess should have enjoyed as much happiness as this world could possibly give. But whether it were so, will appear from the developing incidents of our story.

"You seem offended with me?" said the Baronet, at length breaking silence. "How is it that I have been unfortunate enough to give you offence?"

There was a certain deprecation as well as a remonstrance in his tone which showed that it was not as a mere guest he was speaking to his noble hostess—nor as a friend to a friend—no, nor as a relation to a relation, because there was not the slightest kinship between them. Then, in what capacity was it that he thus spoke? The beautiful blue eyes of the young Duchess glanced half in tenderness and half in affright at him; and her bosom heaved like tumultuous billows as a long deep sigh came up from her very heart, forcing for itself a vent by the portals of ivory and coral which formed the mouth.

"Do you deem me too bold," asked the Baronet;—"do you think that I have been too audacious in whispering to you ere now as I have done? Oh! if you would but give me credit for the immensity of the love which I have dared harbour for you: *Dared*; it is not the word: *To dare* means something that one does spontaneously and deliberately with a heroism of one's own accord. But I—my God! I am as powerless in the vortex of this love of mine as the frailest vessel that ever was tossed amidst the foaming billows of the Maelstrom! Do not there-

fore blame me for loving you :— but pity me !”

The Duchess trembled violently ; and as the moon-beams played slantingly upon her entire form, they revealed the agitation of her countenance—the flush that went and came rapidly upon her cheeks—and the swelling and heaving of the bosom which the low corsage of the evening toilet left half revealed. Sir Abel Kingston looked at her :—never to his eyes did she appear so wondrously beautiful ; and he devoured her with his regards. She glanced at him—he quickly averted his looks, with the consciousness that they were so full of impassioned ardour they might cause her to doubt the pure sincerity of his love, and make her think that it was nothing more than a sensuous flame. She caught the half-vanishing profile so perfect in its masculine beauty : the Baronet’s white teeth shone beneath the moustache which bowed the upper lip ; and at the very same instant when he thought within himself that he had never seen her look so wondrously lovely, did she feel herself smitten with the conviction that he was handsomer than ever she had thought him to be, well as his countenance was known to her !

“I am not offended with you, Sir Abel,” she murmured : “I have no right to be. Alas ! I feel and I know that my conduct has not been altogether consistent with prudence and there have perhaps been looks which I have thrown upon you, and words which I have unguardedly suffered to drop from my lips, that my have seemed like an

encouragement——”

“Oh ! if you regret anything of all this,” interrupted Abel, “tell me that you would wish to go back to that period when we were as mere formal acquaintances !—when I dared not suffer my looks to mingle with your own—or my hand to linger in the clasp which it gave yours—or my tone to catch the infection of my heart’s melting tenderness ! Tell me that such is your wish—and I will at once assume that demeanour which shall be in accordance therewith ! Yes !—for I value your happiness above all other earthly things ; and sooner, sooner would I feel my own heart breaking, than that a single hair of your head should be injured !”

The wily Baronet threw an ineffable pathos into his accents ; and now with anxious looks he watched to mark the effect that his words were to produce.

Again was there the agitation throughout the entire form—that beautiful form in its evening toilet!—again was there the deepening flush upon the damask cheeks ! again the swelling of the bosom as if it must burst its prisonage of corset ! A faintness came for a moment over the young Duchess ; and then, obedient to a sudden impulse, she ejaculated almost with vehemence : No ! no ! I am neither offended with you—nor do I wish to go back to the cold formalities of our first acquaintance some months ago”.

“Then why—why did you refuse ere now to take my arm asked Kingston : “why did you even seem as if my presence was unwelcome to you when I offered to become your escort into the

garden?"

The Duchess did not immediately answer these questions: she reflected deeply for some moments: and then at length she said, "I will tell you the truth, Sir Abel—I will be candid with you! I feared to find myself alone with you; but perceiving that it was impossible to avoid it, I sought to arm myself with as much coldness and reserve as possible—But ah! what am I doing? It is a veritable confession that I am making! Leave me, Sir Abel!—leave me I entreat you!"

"O, no! no!" he ejaculated, in a joyous tone: "not after these delightful encouraging words which have issued from your lips! Oh, it is an avowal of love—it is an admission that the strong sentiment I experience towards you is reciprocated! Oh, Mary! beautiful Mary! I thank thee for that avowal!"

Sir Abel Kingston sank upon one knee as he took the hand of the charming Duchess, and pressed it to his lips. It was the first time that he had ever ventured to call her by her Christian name; and the sound of that name when thus spoken by a voice that was so full of masculine harmony, sent a thrill throughout her entire form. She abandoned her hand to him for some moments; and he rapturously covered it with kisses. At the same time he flung a keen searching glance in the direction of a thicket of evergreens, in the immediate neighbourhood of which this scene took place: and he exclaimed, Oh, Marry! Mary! how happy am I in the consciousness which I at length possess, that this love of mine

a reciprocated!"

"Rise, rise, Abel!" she said deeply agitated: and it was now also for the first time that she addressed him by his Christian name. "Oh, what if any one were to observe us! And this reminds me," she continued, as the Baronet rose and continued to walk by her side, "of the immense impropriety of my conduct! Oh, I beseech you to forget everything that has just passed between us—I recall what I said—I will admit nothing! No, no! I will not permit you to put any interpretation you think fit upon those words which fell from my lips I know not how!"

"Recall nothing, I beseech you!" exclaimed Kingston. "And why should you? You have suffered me to understand that you love me; and you have put me in possession of a degree of happiness from which I cannot part. And if it be happiness to you also to love one who will sincerely love you in return, wherefore should you not abandon yourself to that bliss? Your husband appreciates not your great beauty—he neglects you—nay, more than neglects you—"

"Sir Abel Kingston," interrupted the Duchess with a certain degree of seriousness, if not of absolute severity in her tone, "do not seek to undermine my sense of duty to my husband by misrepresenting that conduct on his part which may perhaps be fully explained! You know the reason which compels me to remain chiefly at Thornbury. It is so absolutely necessary that my unfortunate mother-in-law should have the benefit of this beautiful fresh air. The comparatively close atmosphere of

our town-residence seems to kill her! But the duke has his parliamentary duties to attend to during the season—then, in the autumn there is the excursion to the moors in Scotland and he has his shooting-box——”

“But what if I were to tell you, Mary,” interrupted the Baronet, “that while you remain chiefly at Thornbury in order to devote yourself to the care of the unfortunate Dowager-Duchess,—what should you think if I were to tell you that his Grace, your ducal husband, occupies his time during his frequent and prolonged absences in a manner very different from what you seem to imagine? What, in short, if I could prove to you that not merely have you become an object of indifference to him, but that a successful rival has usurped the place which you were wont to occupy in his heart?”

“Say no more! say no more, Sir Abel Kingston!” cried the young Duchess; “for I should not believe you! No, no! I cannot think——”

“I swear to you,” exclaimed the Baronet, “that what I tell you is the exact truth. Your husband keeps a mistress to whom he is devotedly attached, and on whom he is inclined to lavish large sums. All this I can prove.”

The beautiful Duchess became pale as death—yes, pale, as the marble statues which embellished the spacious garden; and then in another moment a crimson glow suffused her cheeks, her neck, and her bosom. But again that vivid evidence of indignation vanished; and the said with white quivering lips, and in a low deep tone, “Prove to me

the truth of the assertions you have just made—and—and—I will refuse you nothing—I will be wholly thine.”

It was an ejaculation of joy which burst from the Baronet's lips, and at the same time an expression of sardonic triumph flitted over his countenance. Then, as he continued to walk slowly by the side of the Duchess, he gave her certain explanations in proof of the statements which he had put forth she listened in profound silence—with colourless cheeks, and with a fixed resolute gaze of the beautiful blue eyes; so that as Sir Abel glanced at her, he had no difficulty in discerning that whatsoever design she was revolving in her thoughts, she was certain to carry out, for that a new spirit had been conjured up within her.

When he had ceased speaking, a deep silence prevailed for some three or four minutes; and then the Duchess said, “I have listened to all that you have told me—and not a syllable has escaped my attention. I shall find some means to test the truth of the story. If I find that it is precisely as you have represented, and that my husband has thus so entirely bestowed his heart upon another, the pledge which I have given you shall be kept. But on taking leave of me this evening you must not return to Thornbury until you receive a note from me. We must not meet again until it be decided on what terms we are henceforth to regard each other. For I swear, Sir Abel Kingston, if I find you have deceived me in reference to my husband, everything shall be at an end betwixt

you and me. But if, on the other I discover that the facts are precisely as you represent them, *then* the first vengeance that I will wreak upon my husband will be to fulfil the pledge which I ere now gave you. Meanwhile let us separate."

Having thus spoken, the young Duchess turned abruptly away from the spot where she had halted to address this last speech to Sir Abel Kingston; and she began to retrace her way rapidly towards the mansion. The Baronet remained for nearly a minute where she had left him; and the intensity of his inward-chuckling was expressed by the glow of triumph which overspread his countenance. He at length moved away from the place—that is to say, he sauntered a little farther along the avenue; and then he returned to retrace his steps. He watched until the beautiful Duchess was out of sight; and then he proceeded quickly towards that knot of evergreens to which he had glanced so keenly when kneeling at the feet of the brilliant patrician lady. In another moment there was a rustling amongst those shrubs; and then a man came forth from the place which evidently had served him as a lurking-hole. He was about fifty years of age: his complexion was sallow—and upon his face there were many hard lines which gave it a most sinister expression. He wore a long surtout coat, which fitted him loosely, as if his form, which was naturally thin, had shrunk since it was made for him—or else as if (which was much more likely) the garment had been bought ready-made, and had

therefore never fitted him properly at all. He wore shoes, the strings of which were tied in a slovenly fashion; and his trousers hung in wrinkles or plain about the lower part of the leg as if they were not braced sufficiently, or as if they had been always too long. A pocket of a red cotton pocket-handkerchief hung out of his pocket; his hat was almost napless, and the front part of the brim was greasy and also put out of shape with much handling. He walked with a stick; and though only of the middle age, he seemed to be prematurely infirm in his limbs.

Such was the individual who emerged from the hiding—place of evergreens on perceiving that the Baronet halted near the spot in a significant manner as if to imply that the coast was clear.

"Well, Casey," said Sir Abel in a half-patronising, half-entreating voice, "you have heard what has taken place. Are you satisfied?"

"I have heard that the young Duchess has confessed her love for you, Sir Abel," replied Casey "but I cannot say I am satisfied that you will be enabled to turn the circumstance to the advantage you expect: for how do you know to what extent her Grace is allowed to put her hand into her husband's purse?"

"Come, come, my dear Casey, be reasonable!" exclaimed the Baronet. "You promised me that if I afforded you a proof of the probability of this love-intrigue of mine turning out successfully, you would agree to wait a while. I have done what you required—I elicited from her Grace's lips the avowal on the very spot where it could best reach

your ears——”

“But how do I know what followed?” demanded Casey, whose voice was hard and cold and monotonous, and the expression of whose eyes was implacable as well as full of mistrust. “You walked away together:—she may have recanted by the time she was fifty paces off, and when beyond earshot in respect to me——”

“No, no, she did not recant,” exclaimed the Baronet. “On the contrary, in a very short time she will be so far compromised with me as to be entirely in my power; and you, Mr. Casey, with your knowledge of the world, cannot fail to be aware how much a man can do with a woman who is infatuated with him! And when once I secure this hold on her, it will be as easy as possible to obtain a few thousands——”

“Well, I hope for your sake, that it will prove so,” said Casey. “I shall wait to see the issue of this adventure of yours; and then I shall wait no longer. You know what I mean. So let there be no unnecessary loss of time.”

Casey bent a look of reptile-like significancy upon the Baronet, who failed not to perceive it; and for an instant he actually ground his teeth with rage at finding himself in the power of such a man. But instantaneously recovering himself he said, in that half-patronising, half-entreating tone to which we have before alluded, “Come, come, Casey, do not be too hard upon me, nor yet too impatient—and all will yet be well. And now you had better take yourself off. That avenue is the one by which you entered the grounds——”

“Yes, by climbing over the palings at the end,” interrupted Casey, the monotony of his voice now breaking into irascibility. “A pretty thing for a man like me to do, with the chance of being seized upon by some gardener as a thief—besides the chances of tearing my pantaloons.”

“I would offer to come and assist you over the palings,” said the Baronet, “only, if any of the guests straying in that direction should happen to meet us together, they would think it strange——”

“No doubt!” interrupted Casey, glancing down at his toilet; “for any one can tell that I am not a fitting guest for Thornbury Park!”

Having thus spoken, with a species of cynical bitterness mingled with scorn and irony, Mr. Casey passed as rapidly along the avenue as his infirm limbs could convey him.

The Baronet returned into the mansion—but it was only to order his carriage to be gotten in readiness, so that he might immediately take his departure; for he knew the disposition of the young Duchess well, and he knew that he should be only injuring his cause by venturing to seek her again after the positive injunction she had given that he was to appear no more in her presence until she should have put to the test the tale which he had told her in reference to her husband.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TWO FRIENDS.

TWO or three days after the incidents which we have been relating, a handsome showily-dressed young female, whose age was probably about twenty, knocked at the door of Mademoiselle Imogene's house in the vicinity of Astley's Amphitheatre. The summons was soon answered by the servant-woman, who evidently knew the visitress—for she at once said, "You can walk in, miss, if you please."

The young female, availing herself of this permission entered the little parlour which we have before described, and where Imogen was now lounging in a large arm-chair, in a mood that was half-listless and half-pensive, just as when we first introduced her to our readers. She was dressed in a morning wrapper: she was completely *en negligee*—but though her toilet was yet unmade there was nothing slovenly in her appearance, and the freshness of her skin denoted that her ablutions had been fully attended to. The little girl was playing about the room, and she presented as perfect a picture of neatness and cleanliness as when we first described her.

"Ah, my dear Alice," said Miss Hartland, in a tone alike familiar and languid, "is it you? But I need scarcely ask such a question—for you are almost my only visitor—and you are assuredly always a welcome one."

"To-day is Saturday, you know," exclaimed Miss Alice Denton—for we may as well at once acquaint the reader with

the young female's entire name; "and consequently to-morrow is Sunday," she added, in a gay tone. "So I came to propose that we should take a run down to Gravesend—or even as far as Margate if you like; for I see that an excursion steamer is advertised—"

"No, I thank you, Alice," interrupted Miss Hartland: "no more excursion-trips for me."

"Why, what has come over you, Imogen?" demanded her friend in surprise. "For the last three or four weeks you have refused to take any holiday, although the fine weather has set in, and you and I always used to make it a rule to enjoy ourselves once a week!"

"I know it, Alice—I know it, my dear friend," answered Imogen; "but my humour is changed. Do not seek me as a companion for your hours of recreation and gaiety—you would find me a very dull one."

"But why is this, Imogen?" inquired Alice, with a tone and look of concern—for she evidently was a good-natured, kind-hearted young-woman. "I have noticed that you have not been the same you were wont; and it is not that you have heard any ill-tidings concerning your brother—for if so, you would have told me—because that at least could be no secret. Ah! I begin to think, Imogen, that you must be in love!"

Miss Hartland made no immediate answer; and nothing on her part indicated that her friend was right in the conjectures she had just thrown out. Indeed, Imogen seemed as if she had not caught the words at all: but at the expiration of a couple of minutes,

she said in a strange, wild, vacant manner, "Yes, Alice—I am in love."

"Oh, then, if your love be unrequited," cried Miss Denton, "you must endeavour to divert your thoughts into other channels. But if your love be reciprocated, then it is a very strong reason why you should enjoy yourself with an occasional holiday, in order to celebrate as it were the happiness you thus experience. Therefore, in reference to the excursion of to-morrow——"

"Do not talk to me of excursions, Alice!" interrupted Imogen, somewhat petulantly. "It was on one of those occasions—you will remember it well, Alice—it was the final one we took last autumn——"

"What!" ejaculated Miss Denton, starting as if a sudden light flashed in unto her comprehension: "you do not mean that the tall handsome young gentleman, who picked up your book when you dropped it, and who handed us so politely ashore at Margate——"

"Why have you fixed upon him?" inquired Miss Hartland, as a slight flush now crossed her cheeks.

"Oh, a thousand reasons struck me,—a thousand recollections swept into my head," cried Alice, "when you spoke of that excursion! I remember it was there I first saw that young gentleman: but I have seen him fifty times at the theatre since—and I have met him walking in the Westminster Road and upon the bridge; but I never gave the matter much thought—for one often and often sees the same faces at the theatre—and then as

to one person meeting another very frequently in the same neighbourhood, that is also likely enough if they both live there——"

"But are you sure that the young gentleman to whom you allude lives in this neighbourhood?" inquired Imogen, somewhat quickly.

"I have no certainty on the point," answered Alice. "I was merely saying that I used to think he might live in this district, and that therefore it never struck me as being at all peculiar that I should so often meet him. But now a new light has flamed upon me, and I understand it all! It was to see *you* that he frequented the theatre!—and he is the one whom you love! Is it not so?"

"Why do you think it?" asked Imogen.

"Because he evidently admired you so much when first we saw him on board the steamboat; and you remarked to me what a nice-looking young gentleman he was—and for all the rest of that day you were abstracted. Do you not remember that I jested you on the subject? Well, it all went out of my mind until this moment; and now it comes back to me with the force of a revelation. Again I ask you, Imogen, am I not right?"

Miss Hartland remained silent for nearly a minute; and then she replied, "Yes, Alice, you are right."

"And who is the young gentleman?" inquired Miss Denton, with the quickness of an excited curiosity.

"I do not know," was the answer.

"Well, but his name, then?" ejaculated Alice.

"I do not know it," was the response.

"Not know it! But where does he live? Tell me *that*—and we will very soon know his name! the nearest butcher or baker in his neighbourhood will give us the information."

"I do not know where he lives," rejoined Imogen.

"Ah, this is strange!" cried Alice. "Yet you love him? Is he aware of it?"

"Perhaps—I do not know—I cannot tell," said Imogen, in a slow thoughtful manner. "I have never spoken to him. And yet——"

"Oh, this is the most extraordinary adventure I ever heard of!" exclaimed Alice Denton. "Here is a young gentleman with whom you are desperately in love, and who I feel convinced is equally enamoured of you; and yet you know nothing of him!—not so much as his name! You have never exchanged a word with him—and you do not even appear to be sure that he knows he is loved in return! But surely, my dear Imogen, there is a language in the eyes—an eloquence in the looks.

"Yes," said Miss Hartland, in a still lower and more deliberate tone than before; "he *must* know that I love him! When we have met in the streets, or have passed each other in the Park on a Sunday, he must have seen the tell-tale blush which has swept across my cheeks! And then too, in the circus, he must have observed the emotion which I have not possibly been enabled to conceal——"

"Of course he has seen all this!" cried Alice. "But what a singular sentimental affair it is! Why,

when Sylvester took it into his head to fall in love with me, he soon found an opportunity of speaking out; and then I at once asked him his name. Ah, I remember the occasion well!—and Alice laughed merrily. "First of all he said his name was Sylvester; and I assured him it was a very pretty one. But I told him that was not enough—that he surely had another name—and that he must deal candidly with me if he wished me ever to speak to him again. So then he gave me his card. *Mr. Sylvester Casey*! Oh, how I laughed at that name of Casey! Indeed I could scarcely restrain myself when he went on to tell me that his father was the rich Mr. Casey of Hatton Garden——"

"You have told me all this before, my dear Alice, over and over again!" ejaculated Imogen, somewhat impatiently.

"True! so I have," said the good-natured Miss Denton. "So now let us return to your own affairs, my dear friend. This young gentleman—how stands the matter now?"

"Look!"—and for a moment her beautiful blue eyes flashed with a sinister glare, and she extended her faultlessly shaped hand towards the child, muttering ominously between her white teeth, "There is the cause of all I now suffer!"

Little Annie was playing with a new doll, and she did not hear what was thus said—nor did she observe the strong emotion that was at the instant agitating Imogen, she was unconscious of the fierce gust of passion whereof she was the cause on the part of that female. Nevertheless this strange impulsive creature was

evidently smitten all in a moment with a remorse at her conduct towards the child: and bounding across the room, she snatched up the little girl and pressed her to her bosom, exclaiming, "Dear Annie! darling, darling Annie! Oh, you pretty creature, you! how I love you! how I love you!"

The child threw her arms about Imogen's neck, smiling with a sweet infantile smile, while Alice Denton looked on with an air that showed she was by no means surprised at the scene, and that therefore it was not the first time it had occurred in her presence.

"Yes, she is a sweet dear little creature," said Alice, now in her turn bestowing a caress upon Alice when Imogen set her down again upon the carpet. "But tell me, my dear friend," she continued, "how it has happened —"

"Listen!" interjected Imogen: "I will tell you in a few words. Six months have passed since that excursion to Margate, when first I beheld the handsome young stranger. You noticed the incident of his picking up the book I dropped. It had on the fly-leaf the name of *Mademoiselle Imogene*; for it was a present from our young French friend Rose. Well, I saw that the handsome young stranger glanced at the name on the fly-leaf as he picked up the volume; and then he flung a look upon me full of surprise and delight. The very next evening he was at the theatre. I am not going to make a long story of it my dear Alice: suffice it therefore to repeat what you yourself ere now said, that during the last six months he has been often and often at the

theatre and often and often wandering about the neighbourhood. I have no vanity—but I could not help understanding what all this meant. Ah! and I comprehended likewise that his love must be a pure and honourable sentiment; for if he had entertained a different passion—if he had hoped, in a word, that he could make me his mistress, he would speedily have accosted me with his overtures. Well, then Alice, it was because I felt convinced he loved me as I could wish to be loved, that I came to love him fondly in return. And often, and often, when we met, his eyes told me the tale of his honourable sentiments—yes, with a single look they conveyed volumes of the silent language of the heart——"

"I would much sooner have had a single page of an audible language from the lips," interjected Alice, "than all those volumes of the heart's hieroglyphics. Why, it has been the most stupidly sentimental affair ——"

But here Alice Denton stopped short for she beheld a sudden flush of indignation upon Imogen's beauteous countenance. It however immediately passed away; and it was with a good-tempered meloncholy smile that Miss Hartland observed, "You cannot enter into my feelings, Alice. Let me therefore make a speedy end of my story. It was about three weeks ago that I took my little Annie to a shop in the Westminster Road to purchase her a new frock,—when behold! I found myself face to face with him. It was the first time he had ever seen little Annie with me. I saw that he

became deadly pale as if he experienced a sudden shock; and I felt the burning blush sweep over my countenance. Then a dimness appeared to come upon my vision: by an effort I recovered myself—and he was already hurrying away in another direction. Two or three hours later I saw him in this street—yes, in this street! The dusk was then setting in—and he was muffled in a cloak; but I beheld him glide out of one shop and then into another, where he stayed for several minutes—

“Do you think he was asking questions?” inquired Alice.

“There can be no doubt about it,” rejoined Imogen: “he was seeking information concerning me. From that day I have seen him no more. And now, Alice, not another syllable upon the subject!—but do not, my dear friend, ask me to accompany you on any more excursions, for I am not in the humour for them. Leave me to myself. You have your Sylvester to escort you—”

“Oh, Sylvester indeed!” ejaculated Alice, pouting her pretty lips with an expression of mingled scorn and contempt. “A miserable puppy—as mean as he is boastful—”

“What is that roll of papers you have brought with you, Alice?” abruptly inquired Imogen, as if she did not like the turn which the discourse had just then taken.

“Ah, I quite forgot!” exclaimed Alice. “I came on purpose to show you the portrait; but we almost immediately got talking upon other subjects—”

“Ah it is the portrait—eh?” said Imogen and she proceeded

to unfold the roll of thick paper.

“It was a lithograph picture of Alice Denton, in the same style and by the same artist as the portrait of Mademoiselle Imogene which was suspended to the wall in the parlour. The reader has doubtless understood that Imogen’s friend followed the same profession as herself, and was engaged at Astley’s Amphitheatre; but she had not been honoured with a French nomenclature. At the bottom of her portrait figured the veritable English name—MISS ALICE DENTON. She was therein represented in a fantastic dress, and in the act of taking off a mask from her countenance. The costume and mask bore reference to some favourite character which she was wont to personate; but we need not trouble our reader with many details on this point. In respect to Miss Alice herself, we have already said she was very good-looking; but she was entirely deficient in that intellectuality which characterized the face of Imogen Hartland. The features of Alice Denton breathed a soft sensuousness; and her figure, instead of being striking and brilliant, was soft and voluptuous, though modelled to an admirable symmetry. Good nature, an easy indifference to the cares of the world, and a very moderate amount of mental culture, were indicated by the expression of Miss Denton’s face. Like her friend Imogen, she had blue eyes but they were only languishing, and not vivacious: they were indicative of an indolent, luxurious temperament—a disposition that was frank and easy, gay and thoughtless, callous and fond of pleasure. The formation of the

mouth and the voluptuously rounded chin combined to tell the same tale. Though she was not more than nineteen or twenty years of age, yet her figure already gave indications of an expansion to *embonpoint*; yet it was far from deficient in grace—and the limbs, though robust, were perfect in their modelling. Neither she nor Imogen had aught of that jaded or fading appearance which so frequently characterizes actresses when seen in the daytime: there was not the slightest shade of a blush tint under the eyes; and thus these beings, when viewed together, though in many respects so different, nevertheless formed a group of a most interesting character.

The merits of the portrait were discussed for some little while by the two young females; and then Alice took her departure, having vainly endeavoured to persuade her friend Imogen to accompany her in the water excursion on the morrow.

When Alice had left, Miss Hartland ascended to her chamber to perform her toilet. She dressed herself in a plain neat attire, so that she now looked a very different being from what she was in the fantastic semi-Greek, semi-ideal costume which she wore when we first introduced her to our readers. She had a thick veil attached to her bonnet; for there were times when she found it convenient to conceal her countenance, because if recognised in any public place as Mademoiselle Imogene, the "star" of Astley's, she was liable to become the focus of half a dozen quizzing-glasses stuck into the eyes of snobs, gents, and fast

young men about town.

Leaving little Annie in the care of her servant-woman, and affectionately assuring the child that she would not fail to bring her some sweet meats, Miss Hartland quitted the house. Passing into the Westminster Road, she crossed the bridge and proceeded to a large linen-draper's in the neighbourhood of Charming Cross, where she had some purchases to make. On leaving the establishment, Imogen said to herself, "I am half inclined to call upon the brilliant Duchess; for more than a week has elapsed since she promised to communicate with me —"

But here Imogen's reflections were suddenly cut short and all her ideas were turned into another channel, by the appearance of an individual who was issuing from the narrow passage leading by way of Spring Gardens into St. James's Park. He was a young man of about two-and-twenty—a little above the middle height—of handsome countenance—and good figure. He had brown hair, curling naturally and fine blue eyes. The expression of his face conveyed the idea of blended intelligence and amiability. He looked like a good young man rather than a high-spirited one; and if any one, on pointing him out to another, had said that he cultivated poetry, that he was fond of music and the fine arts—that he was an affectionate son, a kind brother, and a good-natured friend—the description would precisely correspond with the first impression made by the young man's appearance. He was neatly yet plainly dressed: his

toilet indicated a perfect gentility of taste, and his manner was altogether that of the well-bred gentleman without pride or pretention.

Such was the young gentleman whose appearance produced a sudden effect upon Imogen Hartland. He was proceeding slowly on this way, and with an air of pensiveness, so far as she could judge at that distance. He was looking neither to the right nor to the left; she felt convinced that he did not notice her; and she could not help following him. Her veil was drawn down over her countenance; she had on a different apparel from any that she had ever worn before;—it was plainer and more simple; for whereas she had once been wont to dress showily, like her friend Alice Denton, she had become more and more simple in her taste ever since the love she had conceived for the handsome young stranger had spread its influence over all the phases of her mind.

He pursued his way without glancing to the right or to the left, much less stopping to look behind him, until he reached Berkeley Square. There he halted suddenly and looked at his watch; and then he swept his eyes rapidly around. Imogen had abruptly stopped short also; for she was all in a moment struck with the impropriety of her conduct in thus following the young stranger, and she affected to be looking in quite another direction. When she again glanced around, she saw him standing on the upper step of a house about fifty yards off: he had a white kerchief in his hand—and a thrill shot

through her heart as she fancied that he waved significantly. Then he disappeared from her view.

With a brain intoxicated as it were under the influence of wine—full of mingled rapture and suspense—hope and fear wildly conflicting,—and obeying an irresistible impulse,—Imogen sped towards that house. The front door stood open; and a fat hall-porter, with a powdered wig and a very red face, was standing on the threshold. As Imogen reached the bottom step, the porter stood back from the doorway, as if in a respectful manner to make way for her. She paused for a single instant: then she ascended the steps; and at the further end of the hall she beheld the handsome young gentleman just beginning the ascent of a wide marble staircase. He glanced back on observing her: he stopped short for a moment: it seemed as if he were about to descend to speak to her; and then, as if a second thought struck him, he contented himself with bowing in a manner sufficiently courteous—and he continued his way up the staircase.

“Be so kind as to step into this room, ma’am,” said the hall-porter, who had already thrown open a side-door communicating from the hall.

Imogen, who was under the influence of irresistible feelings, crossed the threshold; and the door closed behind her. Then she felt convinced that the course thus pursued by the hall-porter was in obedience to some rapidly-uttered mandate which the young gentleman had given as he entered the house; and

she said to herself, "He *did* wave his kerchief significantly after all! He evidently resides here; and he has resolved that the accident which has thrown me in his way and led me to follow him, should furnish likewise the opportunity for explanations!—But who can he be?"

CHAPTER V.

THE HOUSE IN BERKELEY SQUARE.

IT was a handsome dining-room into which Imogen had thus been shown: the furniture was massive and rich; and the walls were hung with portraits of imposing-looking gentlemen and ladies of stately appearance. Some of the pictures were evidently old, not merely from the dingy aspect of the canvas, which was also cracked in some places, but likewise from the quaintness of the costumes. But in the recesses on either side of the fireplace, there were two portraits which had a fresh appearance as if they had been recently executed. One represented a thin, pale-faced man, with an aristocratic countenance and who was of the middle age. The other portrait was that of a lady, also pale, with very handsome features, and whose age might be some ten years under that of one we have just been noticing. In both the artist had, with an evident fidelity, even to the view of one to whom the originals were unknown preserved a certain air of cold severe pride which blended with the general expression of their countenance.

Imogen had just finished contemplating these pictures through her veil—which she still kept over her countenance, not for any studied motive, but simply from the fact that in the agitation of her thoughts it did not occur to her that she ought to raise it—when the door opened and two personages entered the room. They were a gentleman and a lady; and a glance thrown at each, showed that they were the originals of the two portraits which had just been engaging her attention. She was now seized with confusion: she wondered who they could be, and to what this adventure was to lead. She was smitten with disappointment and surprise that the opening of the door had not given admission to the handsome young gentleman whose image was uppermost in her thoughts. She nevertheless had presence of mind sufficient to incline in a graceful and respectful manner towards these two personage.

We should observe that they both looked a few years older than they seemed in their portraits, so that the age of the gentleman might be about fifty-five and that of the lady proportionately younger. Both countenances wore an expression alike sad and severe, blended with an air of aristocratic pride; and the resemblances to the two portraits were unmistakable.

"Be seated," said the gentleman, indicating a chair; and at the same he and the lady placed themselves on a sofa close by, so that as Imogen sank upon the chair indicated she was immediately opposite to them.

"Have the goodness to raise your veil," said the lady, in a

tone where an unconquerable restraint seemed to be blended with an endeavour to appear patronizing, condescending and conciliatory.

Imogen mechanically obeyed that half-mandate, half-request; and she lifted the thick veil which had previously shaded her countenance from the view. The gentleman and the lady both gave a visible start of surprise: then they contemplated her earnestly and she fancied that the rigidity of their features relaxed somewhat, as if through a feeling of interest with which she inspired them. Miss Hartland met their gaze steadily for a few moments: then she blushed and became confused and she felt that never before in her life was she so completely deficient in self-possession and fortitude.

The gentleman and lady slowly, and as if by a simultaneous impulse, withdrew their looks from her face, and regarded each other.

"She is indeed very beautiful," said the lady in an under-tone; but Imogen's ear caught the words that she spoke.

"Yes—very beautiful," responded her male companion,—
"more beautiful even than Launcelot represented her to us!"

These words were likewise caught by Imogen's ear; and a will shot through her heart. Launcelot!—the name struck her like a revelation. She felt convinced it was that of her hitherto unknown lover; and that brief-low-whispered exchange of sentences seemed to indicate that she was finding favour in the sight of these two personages who appeared in her view as the arbiters of her destiny.

"On the present occasion," resumed the gentleman, "we purpose to say but little, because the circumstances of this meeting are necessarily so peculiar——"

"And likewise to a certain degree painful," interjected the lady. "At the same time it is my duty to confess—and I experience pleasure in making the admission—that your appearance and your manners are altogether so superior to what we could have conceived——"

"Stop!" exclaimed the gentleman: "stop, my dear!" he added, with a tone and look of mild rebuke. "Since the matter has come to this point, we will not perform our own part ungraciously. Do you love our son? or at least do you feel as if you could love him, and that you are prepared to study to your utmost to ensure his happiness?"

Imogen literally trembled all over with an ecstatic joy—wild, rapturous, incredible: she was almost suffocated by her emotions—and it was with difficulty she could falter forth, "Yes,—I love him—and until death it shall be my study to ensure his happiness!"

"Then without another word," said the gentleman "we give our consent to this union."

Imogen's brain reeled: it appeared to her as if she were being whirled round and round in the midst of a—wild fantastic dream; and falling at the feet of him who had just addressed her she took his hand and pressed it to her lips. Then the lady bent towards her and imprinted a kiss upon her forehead. It was assuredly no fervid caress: it was cold and distant as if it were the mere formal

ratification of a compact ; but Imogen cared not for this ; and it was with grateful ardour that she pressed that lady's hand in its turn to her lips. The lady made herrise from the suppliant posture she had assumed ; and she said, " Be seated—compose yourself ! Everything is now arranged ; and never from my lips shall you hear any allusion to antecedent circumstances. Be seated, I repeat—compose yourself—and Launcelot shall join you presently."

The gentleman and lady now rose from the sofa and slowly quitted the room. The instant the door closed behind them, Imogen's feelings burst forth in a fit of weeping ; for the extremes of joy and grief often display themselves in the same manner. By some mechanical movement or unstudied action she drew down the veil over her countenance ; and it soon became moist with the tears that trickled through it. Was it possible that on the very day when she had been complaining to her friend Alice Denton of the unhappiness which her love had brought, so much happiness should have been in store for her ! She thought not to ask herself who Launcelot's parents could be : she reflected not that she was even utterly ignorant of their name. It was sufficient for her that they had given their assent to her marriage with their son ! But this son—she had never even exchanged a word with him ; and all had been managed as if it were a scene in a fairy-tale !

Presently the door opened, and Launcelot made his appearance. Imogen's first impulse was to bound towards him, either

to throw herself upon his breast and sob forth the expression of her thanks, or else to fall down at his feet and assure him of her grateful love. But there was something in his look and manner which suddenly chilled her ardour and gave her a cruel shock. He was deadly pale : he stopped near the threshold of the door—then he seemed to stagger forward for an instant—he pressed his hand to his brow, as if with a sense of uncontrollable anguish—and finally, with the air of one who made a mighty effort to subdue powerfully agitating emotions, he said in a gentle voice, " Forgive me—pardon me—it is over !—and from this moment forth will I be unto you everything that I ought !"

He took her hand and lightly touched it with his lips. He then sat down, or rather threw himself upon the sofa ; and resting his elbow on the back thereof, he leant his head upon his hand, so that his eyes were half averted from Imogen, and she beheld only the side face, with the profile of perfect masculine beauty. She was bewildered what to think : she was shocked—she was cruelly pained ; she knew not whether to display all the pride of woman and put an end to everything in a moment—or whether she should abandon herself to the tenderness of her emotions, sink at his feet, and implore him not to make on her account any sacrifice which was repugnant to his feelings. Then it suddenly struck her that it were well if she at once entered upon certain explanations : and falling upon her knees, she endeavoured to give utterance to

the thoughts that were now uppermost. But her bosom was convulsed with a variety of emotions; and taking his disengaged hand she raised it beneath her veil to her lips. He abandoned that hand to her. Again and again she pressed it to her lips: and she covered it with her tears. There was a footstool close by the sofa: she sat down upon it—and still she retained his hand in her own—no, longer pressing it to her lips—no longer weeping—but remaining perfectly still, in a sort of confused luxury of thought. For at length she was with him!—at length she had heard his voice—and it was full of masculine harmony!—and despite all the mystery which enveloped the entire proceedings she had been informed by his parents that he would be everything that he ought towards her!

And Launcelot was also silent—and it might seem as if he were unconscious of her presence although his hand was still clasped between both her own. At length, as Imogen's mind was slowly recovering from its luxurious confusion and blissful ebriety, she began to ask herself a few questions. Why was the conduct of Launcelot so singular was it not he himself who had brought about the events which were now progressing?—and must he not have besought his parents to consent to his union with Imogen? Was it that he had taken this step in a moment of ungovernable infatuation, and that the instant the very point was gained, he had been stricken with remorse and regret. Again did the necessity of entering upon certain explanations

recur to Imogen; and already were the perfunctory words wavering upon her lips, when Launcelot himself broke the silence of many minutes which had been prevailing.

“On the eve of that solemn union in which our hands are to be joined—on such an occasion as the present—and considering all circumstances, I feel that it is incumbent upon me to tell you the whole truth which regards myself. I am now your affianced—and in a few days I shall become your husband! You have a right to fathom the secrets of my soul to a certain extent; but I will of my own accord annihilate the limit altogether and lay bare to you as it were the mysteries of my heart. You will then comprehend wherefore I was so overcome by emotion ere now; and you will have no ground hereafter to reproach me with hypocrisy or duplicity towards you. No: for I would have you read down to the very profundities of my soul, as if you were plunging your regards into the depths of a stream pellucid to the very bottom!”

Launcelot paused; and such a profound silence then prevailed through the room that a pin might have been heard to drop. Imogen had drunk in, in a species of half-raptured, half-bewildered suspense, the language which flowed upon that soft harmonious voice:—she had hung upon the words as it were upon an isolated and beauteous voice rising from the midst of a choir and beneath the vast arched roof of a cathedral. What was to follow?—what secrets were now to be revealed to her?—what mysteries could be treasured up in

the sanctuary of that young man's heart?

"It was not until some few months ago," he resumed, "that I knew what love was. Having read much, I had necessarily encountered an infinite variety of descriptions of that sentiment. I saw how one depicted it as a fierce consuming passion—a fire devouring the heart that cherished it. I saw how another painted it as a soft æsthetic feeling, bathing the soul in a continuous fount of bliss, and making a paradise of the earth. Then I read how another spoke of love as a frenzy—a passion that was akin to madness—painful like hunger or thirst—tortured by jealousies, suspicions, and misgivings—ever fancying that its own love was not reciprocated enough, and experiencing periods of anguish in which it verged to the extreme bordering upon hatred. I read of the love which would lay down its life for the loved one; and I read likewise of a love which could kill the object of its flame rather than suffer that object to be beloved by any other! On the one side I beheld some who could find no language comprehensive enough to depict the happiness of love: while on the other hand there were bards who could not aggregate a sufficiency of bitter words to depict its misery. Here were those who recorded their rapturous eulogies on rose-tinted paper, with ink of gold, and with a pen plucked from the gay plumage of some bright tropical bird: while on the other hand there were those who chronicled love's miseries with an iron pen dipped in gall. Thus was I bewildered what to think of the

sentiment of love, and my imagination possessed not a creative magic sufficiently powerful to enable me to solve the mystery."

Again did Launcelot pause; and again did a deep silence prevail throughout the apartment; for Imogen, after listening with a deep rapturous absorbing interest to the words that flowed from his lips, was now lost in wonder at the nature as well as the object of such a preface.

"At length," pursued Launcelot "all my doubts were cleared up, and I comprehended what love was. Chance threw in my way a being on whom I had no sooner settled my looks when a secret voice appeared to whisper in my soul that she would exercise the greatest influence over my destinies! I knew not whether it was a sweet presentiment or solemn warning. I longed to speak to her; but I was afraid. Oh, that beautiful face; it was instantaneously imprinted on my heart! By an accident—a book which was dropped and which I picked up—I learnt her name. Surprise seized upon me. I had heard of her before—and this was the first time I had ever seen her. She was an equestrian actress at a theatre!"

Imogen had still retained Lancelot's hand in her own; and as he went on speaking she pressed that hand closer and closer to her lips, and then to her bosom. There was rapture in her soul: yet why should Launcelot tell her this tale the particulars of which she already knew so well?

"From the moment of that meeting," he proceeded "my life became as it were a dream.

It appeared to be as if I lived only for that bright and beautiful creature who had stolen my heart away in a moment. I beheld her at the theatre—I saw her with her frantastic garb in the circus—and I loved her all the more, for me thought that she was one who could embellish and adorn every apparel, no matter of what species! I encountered her in the streets and in the parks; she was then dressed in the ordinary costume of her sex; and again was she all elegance and grace. Yet I never once spoke to her; for singular as it may seem, every time that we met that secret voice whispered in my soul, and still was I ignorant whether it was a sweet presentiment or a solemn warning!

Again was his hand pressed to Imogen's lips, and then to her heart; and if she wondered that he bestowed no caress in exchange, but merely continued to abandon that hand to her, she the next moment thought to herself, "He will finish his narrative—he will bring it down to the present point, so that I may thoroughly understand his entire conduct;—and then he will be all love and affection towards me!"

"You may judge," continued Launcelot, "from what I have been telling you, that I lived as it were in a dream and that my imagination had created for itself an existence more visionary than ever the wildest flight of poetic fancy attained! You may even consider me a madman or a maudlin sentimentalist—a drivelling idiot——"

"No, no!" murmured Imogen, in a low faint voice: and again was the hand pressed still more

fervidly to her lips and to her heart.

"Well then, you are kind to make allowances for me," continued Launcelot, "for I confess that notwithstanding the turn which circumstances have taken, I do not feel despicable in my own estimation. I was not the master of my own feelings: I yielded to the influence of a love as holy as it was mysterious. It was not a passion: it was a sentiment. There was nothing fierce nor frantic in it:—its flow was soft and agreeable: it was dreamy and visionary, yet cherishing all the hopes of a vital reality. For you understand me, I pictured to myself that being to be pure and virtuous: I thought that her goodness must bear the closest relations to her beauty, and that the loveliness of her person was the external sign of the loveliness of her soul. Good God, how I was mistaken! All in a moment the bandage fell from my eyes—it was as if I had been walking in darkness and a light suddenly blazed upon me, lurid and sinister, showing me that she was a lost, fallen, dishonoured creature!"

A wild cry burst from the lips of Imogen as she sprang up from the footstool, and in an instant regained her feet. Launcelot started up from the sofa; and quick as lightning did his eyes glance over the form of the veiled one before him. Then a tremendous agitation seized upon him—he became white as a sheet—he quivered visibly from head to foot—and he ejaculated, "You are not—you are not *she* whom I took you for!"

"No—I am Imogen herself:" and in a moment the veil was

thrown back, revealing a countenance which was even more pale and ghastly, more agitated and scared, than that of the young man himself.

"Oh, my God!" he murmured, pressing his hand to his brow; "how did this happen?—and what have I done?"

"Launcelot, hear me! hear me!" exclaimed Imogen; "hear me, I beseech you!"—and she flung herself at his feet. "You have taken me for another—some tremendous mistake has been committed—evidently by your parents likewise—you are about to wed that *other*—and therefore all hope is dead for me! But still—but still I would not have you think—"

"Oh, Imogen! no more!—'tis vain! We must part for ever!"—and with these wildly ejaculated words, Launcelot burst from the apartment.

For upwards of a minute did Imogen remain upon her knees—there, where she had knelt to him—there, on that spot whence he had just fled away—there she still knelt, bowed down, crushed—the fine-spirited young woman levelled as it were to the very dust beneath the overwhelming weight of a stupendous calamity! At length she slowly rose up: she caught sight of her countenance in a mirror opposite—and she started as if some other face had been looking forth upon her from the polished surface, so altered and woe begone had her own countenance become! She sat down in a chair close by a table; she buried her face in her hands, and she reflected profoundly.

Several minutes passed; and she wondered whether any one

would come to her. She was inclined to ring the bell and ask to see Launcelot again, if only for a few moments: then she thought of penning a few lines and summoning a servant to bear the billet to him: but abruptly discarding both these projects, she ejaculated with bitterness, "Of what avail? He is affianced to another! All is at an end for me!"

She drew the thick veil again over her countenance, and she issued from the apartment. The hall-porter was at his post: he had the same quiet, good-humoured, respectful look as before; and Imogen was almost surprised as she mentally ejaculated, "He suspects not that anything extraordinary has been taking place!"—for a moment before it seemed to her as if every one whom she might encounter would stare at her with a meaning and a significance.

The hall porter opened the door and bowed as Imogen went forth.

"He doubtless takes me for another," she inwardly thought,—"that *other* who was evidently expected here at the same time!—that *other* to whom Launcelot is now affianced!"

Imogen descended the steps; and when she reached the bottom, the door was closed behind her. She continued her way through the Square with a species of dismay in her brain and a horrible tightening at the heart. At length she suddenly recollected something. A respectable looking female servant was advancing; and Imogen accosted her, saying, "Would you be kind enough to tell me whose is that large house with the green verandahs?"

"Oh, that is Lord Trentham's, ma'am," was the reply.

"Ah! and their family——"

"They have but one son," rejoined the servant-maid,—"a very handsome young man—the Hon. Mr. Osborne."

"Thank you," murmured Imogen: and she pursued her way homeward.

CHAPTER VI.

ALICE DENTON AND HER FRIEND.

AT about the same time that the preceding scene was occurring at Trentham House in Berkeley Square, a dashing phaeton and pair, having crossed Waterloo Bridge, turned into the York Road,—which, for the benefit of our country readers, we may as well observe, is a street in the immediate neighbourhood of Astley's Theatre. Though of no very high pretensions, it was nevertheless a superior street to that in which Imogen Hartland lived; and if we make this comparison, it is simply to show that Miss Alice Denton was better lodged than her friend.

Yes—Alice lived in the York Road. She occupied apartments on the first floor: they were ready furnished, but the appointments were of no very elegant character, and the entire aspect of the place bespoke the lodging-house. Nevertheless, for this suite of apartments on the first floor Alice Denton paid thirty shillings a week—in addition to which there were fees for attendance; so that, including the expense of coals and other little *et ceteras*,

Miss Denton lodged at a rental of about two guineas a week. She was fond of good living; and her repasts were of a succulent nature accordingly. On the sideboard there were decanters containing wine. Miss Denton also dressed showily, and frequently appeared with some new article of raiment. But being only in the receipt of a salary of two guineas and a half a week at Astley's Theatre, it is an evident impossibility that Alice Denton could maintain such a style of living on those comparatively slender resources. Truth therefore compels us to state that she was the mistress of a certain Mr. Sylvester Casey, to whom allusion has been previously made.

The dashing phaeton and pair which we represented as turning into the York Road contained that gentleman and his livery-servant. Mr. Sylvester Casey was about five-and-twenty years of age, short in stature, and mean-looking in appearance—red-haired and freckled—of immense pretensions and of a still more stupendous vulgarity. There was nothing of the gentleman about him, but everything bespeaking the "gentish" upstart—the *parvenu* who wanted to be considered a very fast young man. Thus he was dressed in an extravagant fashion—that is to say, in all the most recent abominations, of cut away coat, peculiar waist coat mamelous shirt, and astounding pantaloons. He was bedizened with jewellery: he wore a quizzing-glass continually at his right eye, that side of the face being all screwed up to retain it; and he had a cigar

in his mouth, though in reality his stomach heaved painfully against tobacco-smoke. His servant was one of those cunning leary-looking, short, bow-legged men who may invariably be seen hanging about the mews and stables at the West End of the town, who infest betting-houses, and swarm upon race-courses. Indeed, Mr. Sylvester Casey considered that a groom of sporting appearance was indispensable to a gentleman who had just started a fine turnout. The domestic's livery was therefore outrageously flaring in colour and flaunting in lace; and as if the fellow thought that in some sense he must ape his master, he held a flower between his lips, while the other had the cigar. Everything was new in the entire equipage; and as Mr. Sylvester Casey held the ribbons and gave an artistic flourish with his whip as he dashed round the corner into the York Road, the whole appearance of the thing proclaimed as eloquently as possible, "We are all brand-new! do look at us!"

In this style did Sylvester Casey drive up to the door of the house where dwelt the handsome Alice Denton. A crowd of half of a dozen small boys, two beggars, and a baker's man, instantaneously collected; and Sylvester, while endeavouring to do the thing very fine by tossing the reins in a *nonchalant* manner to his groom, and then leaping out just as if he were perfectly well accustomed to the use of his own private equipage, stumbled and knocked his shin against the sharp edge of the projecting iron step with a violence that brought all the blood into his face and tears into

his eyes. Then, though suffering excruciations, he endeavoured to look as if it were nothing of any consequence; while the small boys were tittering around, and he caught a sly impudent smile just vanishing away from the features of his groom.

"You can walk the prads about for half an hour, Tom," said Mr. Sylvester Casey. "And I tell you what you can do—You can just drive down to What's-his-name yonder, and tell him he needn't keep the black mare any longer for me, as I've made up my mind I shan't take her. And I say, Tom, just look in at t'other place—you know where I mean—down there, you know—and see whether the brown cob is still to be had—and if so, let Jenkins get the saddle on in about half an hour or so, and I'll just give him a trial."

"All these directions were simply given because the groom interjected a "Yes sir," at every third word that his master spoke; and every "Yes, sir," was accompanied by a touch of the hat, which Mr. Sylvester had no doubt produced a very grand effect upon the little crowd collected around, and upon all beholders who were staring from their windows. Besides, it was even still more for the behoof of the fair Alice Denton herself that the process of order-giving and hat-touching was sustained; for this was the first day that Sylvester had sported his new turnout—the first occasion therefore on which Alice had seen it.

He entered the house, and ascended the stairs to Miss Denton's sitting-room. Throwing

himself upon the sofa, taking off his hat with one hand, and running; the fingers of the other through his villanous straight coarse red hair, he said in an affected tone, "Well, Alice, what do you think of it? It'll do, eh? It's the thing, isn't it? Rather slap-up, I fancy? A neat trap—ain't it? And the prads—stunners—eh,?"

"Why, it is a very pretty turn-out, Sylvester," responded Alice. "And I suppose you mean to come to-morrow and take me for a drive with you? You have often promised that we should go to Richmond and have dinner at the Star and Garter——"

"That's like eating gold, Alice," answered Mr. Sylvester Casey. "Not that I mind, you know; only I was thinking that if we went to Greenwich—there you can get such a nice tea—for——"

"NinePence a-piecel!" cried Alice with mingled gaiety and contempt: "Fie, Sylvester! If you can afford to keep that dashing equipage, you surely can manage to treat me with a little more liberality than you have done."

"Well, by Jove, Alice," ejaculated Sylvester, "If this isn't too bad! you have all you want. Look at these lodgings—fit for a princess"

"I ought to have my own furniture," interjected Alice poutingly "Every young lady in my situation——"

"Oh, nonsense! your own furniture!" exclaimed Sylvester. "Only conceive what an expense it is when you move! And then too, you would be wanting me to insure it!"

"Well, come, we will not have any words," interrupted Alice: and then she added coaxingly

"I suppose you have brought me the gold watch you promised?"

"No, by Jove, I haven't thought," cried Sylvester. "The truth is, I couldn't find a second-hand—mean to say a neat little lady's watch—though, 'pon honour, I went strolling about last evening looking in at all the pawnbrokers—I mean to say jewellers' windows——"

"Oh, I daresay," interrupted Miss Alice, "what you first said you meant! For shame of you, Sylvester! you set up your carriage but you treat me——"

"Treat you? he ejaculated how the deuce do I treat you? why admirably! Here you are living at the rate of at least five guineas a week——"

"Half of which I earn by my own Profession," interjected Alice.

"And a very good job, too, that you can do it!" said Sylvester.

"But you promised me when——when——you know what I mean——when our connexion began," continued Alice, half pouting half good humouredly coaxing, that you would take me altogether away from the horsemanship——"

"It would be a sin," observed Sylvester. "you look admirably in the circus!"

"But I don't like it!" exclaimed Alice.

"You ought to like it, my dear girl," rejoined Sylvester. "I keeps down your fatt. You are the *embopoint* least thing inclined to."

"Then why not buy me a horse?" exclaimed Alice.

"Ah, that would be something liberal on your part!"

"Well, well, my deargirl, we shall see. You mustn't talk to me of gold watches and horses for the present: I am as hard up as

the deuce! It is with difficulty I can spare you your two guineas today——”

“Two guineas and a half, if you please sir!” cried Alice, now speaking vehemently, and indeed with illconcealed scorn and disgust.

“Oh, two guineas and a half, is it? Well, be it so. But as I was saying, if you only knew the bother and trouble I have had to screw enough out of the governor to get that little drag and those prads——”

“And yet your father is very rich, Sylvester?” interjected Alice.

“Rich? Well, no doubt of it—but precious close! And therefore, Alice, if sometimes I don’t seem to be quite as liberal to you as I ought—But Ah, by the bye!” he abruptly ejaculated, “the very thing I ought to have told you first I am coming to last! It’s all settled.”

“What is all settled?” inquired Miss Denton, with an air of more indifference than interest.

“Why, the little business that I was hinting to you about t’other day,” rejoined Sylvester. “The fact is, Alice, it shan’t make any difference betwixt you and me as far as my coming to see you on the sly and giving you your money is concerned: but I don’t think it will be proper for us to be seen too publicly together——”

“What on earth does he mean?” ejaculated Alice.

“Oh, you know very well! That business is coming off. Not that I shall be proud, you know, Alice—because it’s all very well to have an *Honourable* prefixed to your name; but in my humble opinion Sylvester Casey, Esquire, is just as good as the Hanour-

able Launcelot Osborne.”

“Oh,” said Alice; “now do I recollect you said something the other day about marriage between your sister and the gentleman you have just named. But Lord bless you. Sylvester! those kind of things go in at one ear and out at another—particularly as you are now and then given to shooting with the long bow.”

“Don’t say that again Alice,” interjected the young man angrily, while his countenance was as red as a peony: “or else I shan’t like it.”

“Well, about this marriage?” said Miss Denton “when is it to take place?”

“In a few days,” responded Sylvester, “’Twas only settled this morning. My father and Launcelot had a final interview——”

“Mr. Osborne, I presume, having duly proposed to your sister, and being referred by her to your father?”

“Well, *that* was not exactly the way in which the business was managed,” resumed Sylvester. “You see, my dear Alice, the Trenthan family are entirely in my father’s power. The governor can sell up everything at any moment—landed estates and all—because Launcelot has executed a deed cutting off the entail; so that in plain terms it only depends on the governor make beggars of the Trenthan family at any moment. But this is not his game; he has got plenty of money: it isn’t *cash* that he wants, Alice—it’s *connexion*. There! deuce take it! I’ve spoke it out plain enough—and now you understand me. But don’t go telling any body what I’m saying to

you."

"Not I," said Miss Denton carelessly. "I am not acquainted with a soul to whom your family or those of Lord Trentham are at all likely to prove of any interest. But does Launcelot Osborne love your sister?"

"Oh, love! brother take love in a match of this sort! But the truth is Launcelot and Selina have seen each other so seldom—Ah, by the bye!" and here he again interrupted himself with suddenness: then taking out his watch, he cried, "Yes—this is just about the time!"

"What is the time?" asked Alice: "I mean, to what do you allude?"

"Why, Selina is to be at Trentham House between three and four o'clock, to be introduced to my lord and her ladyship."

"What?" ejaculated Alice, in astonishment: "have things gone so far without your sister even so much as knowing the parents of her intended husband? Well, this is the most extraordinary thing I ever heard of in all my born days!"

"Oh, but in fashionable life," said Sylvester, flippantly, "love never enters into the question, Launcelot Osborne is a good-looking young fellow enough—though perhaps he hasn't quite so much *dash* about him as I have, and therefore is not likely to get on quite so well with the fair sex——"

"Oh, you are, indeed irresistible!" said Alice: and then she burst forth into the merriest peal of uncontrollable laughter.

"I don't know what you mean," cried young Casey, "whether this is joke or not; but all I can say is——"

"Why, of course I meant it as serious," said Miss Denton; "only that you looked so singular at the moment I could not help laughing. But pray go on. You were telling me that at this very hour your sister was going to be introduced to Lord and Lady Trentham——"

"Yes—the thing is so arranged. Of course the governor——"

"That means your father I suppose?" remarked Alice.

"Why, you know it does! Don't I always call him the governor? That's the fashionable term now-a-days. And so, as I was saying, the governor of course knows Lord Trentham well enough, because they have had all their money connections together; but his lordship has never been to our house, and doesn't as yet know me or my mother—though I daresay by this time he has formed the acquaintance of my sister. She is to call at Trentham House all alone, so as to avoid any display or ceremony——"

"And does your sister like this proceeding?" asked Alice.

"Like it?" said Sylvester. "Well, to tell you the truth, Selina is a very great fool, and she doesn't seem to know her own interests quite so well as she ought. Of course I can speak plain to you, Alice—and therefore I don't mind saying it's a deuced fine thing for Selina to make such a match. The Hon. Mrs. Osborne at once, and Lady Trentham hereafter!"

"But if your sister does not love this Mr. Osborne," interjected Alice, "she may well have scruples——"

"Oh, don't bother me again about love! cried the young man

"it's all very well to read of in plays and romances! Launcelot Osborne is good-looking enough—and Selina is a deuced pretty girl—though I say it which perhaps shouldn't say it, being her brother; and so I have no doubt they will like each other well enough when they are spliced."

"And so your sister is a very pretty young lady?" said Alice: and then, after a pause, she inquired with a sly look towards her protector, "Is she anything like you?"

"Well," said Sylvester, rising from the sofa, and advancing towards the mirror, in front of which he stood running his freckled hand through his horrible red hair, "I can't say that she is precisely in my style, though of course there is a certain family resemblance: but her hair is not—hem—auburn like mine; and—and—her complexion has not of course got these—what-d'ye call them?—sunburns, which are all very well in a man—Indeed they rather become him—though in a woman they may be thought slightly objectionable. Then, as for eyes, mine are——"

"Green," Alice ventured to interject, but in a low tone.

"Eh! what?" ejaculated Sylvester, as he gave a sudden start. "You said——"

"Nothing," rejoined Alice, looking up quite innocently. "Pray go on. You were describing your sister."

"Oh, well," cried the young man, still smarting under the idea that his mistress had intended to joke insultingly with him "I have told you enough about my sister to-day. But by the by Alice," he went on to observe, recovering his good temper,

"you were speaking just now about my taking you out somewhere for an excursion to-morrow and you named the Star and Garter at Richmond. Now what should you say if I were to tell you to invite your friend Mademoiselle Imogene?"

"She would not come," answered Alice.

"She wouldn't come?" ejaculated Sylvester. "Well, that would be a fine game! You don't mean to say she plays the prude when everybody knows she has got a child of three or four years old."

"Ah, that child indeed!" exclaimed Alice, as if she were about to make to make some revelation concerning it: and then checking herself, she said "But it is of no use—you would not believe me if I were to tell you."

"Not believe what? That your friend Imogen is privately married—or is a widow—or anything else to prove that she is quite a respectable character?"—and Sylvester laughed mockingly.

No matter, sir; Interjeed Alice, somewhat sharply: "let us change the subject. And now," she asked good-humouredly, will you come and take me for an excursion to-morrow? or will you not? I do not particularly care—only I wish to know for certain; because if you could not possibly make it convenient, there is Mr. Blundell——"

"What! the acrobat?" ejaculated Sylvester.

"Well, yes—the acrobat?" rejoined Alice. "There is no harm in being an acrobat is there? I am sure he is a very handsome man—and all the ladies seem to

admire him, particularly when he climbs to the top of the ladder or balances himself upon the great glob up the sloping plank."

"Well, well—what of your Mr. Blundell?" demanded Sylvester, with an air of jealous vexation.

"Only that he was telling me yesterday," replied Alice, "that whitebait dinners have begun at Greenwich and Blackwall—and he offered to take me to one of those places to-morrow."

"Oh, but I haven't said yet that I won't take you to the Star and Garter at Richmond. And now that I think of it, I should rather like the trip. It is not at all probable we shall meet any of the Trentham family down there on a Sunday; and so I will take you, Alice. But don't go and flatter yourself now, that I am jealous of this Mr. Blundell the acrobat; for such an idea would be ridiculous. And now good-bye till to-morrow."

Mr. Sylvester Casey took his departure, and as he endeavoured to make his equipage cut sharp round the nearest corner, so as to give a proof of his skill in driving to all persons who might be beholding him at the moment, he dashed one of the fore-wheels with such violence against the lamp-post that it was a marvel the phaeton was not upset. The bystanders laughed; and Mr. Sylvester Casey's dignity experienced the utmost humiliation for some little time, until by the aid of his consummate conceit it was enabled to recover itself.

Soon after Sylvester's departure, Alice Denton put on her bonnet and scarf and proceeded to pay another visit to her friend

Imogen Hartland. She found the Star of the Circus seated in her little parlour in a very thoughtful mood; and the child, as usual, was playing with her toys. Imogen made a slight gesture of impatience as Alice entered the room—for she wished to be alone with her own reflections."

"Am I intruding?" inquired Miss Denton who was too good humoured to take offence for so slight a cause. "If so I will retire. I shall see you to-night at the theatre. I dare say you are surprised to find me dropping in upon you twice in the same day——"

"Do not go away Alice," said Imogen now speaking kindly and even affectionally to her friend, whose hand she took. "I have something to tell you. yes—I will tell you what has occurred. There need be no secrets between you and me—then after a pause, she added very seriously and in a low voice, "I have seen him—I have spoken to him—I have been alone with him—his hand has been pressed to my lips and to my heart——"

"Good heavens, Imogen! And yet you are unhappy?" ejaculated Alice. "You are pale—careworn——"

"How can I be otherwise than unhappy?" asked Imogen, shaking her head, with an air of the deepest despondency. "Launcelot Osborne——"

"Launcelot Osborne?" cried Alice, at once struck by the name.

"Yes," responded Imogen; "he whom I loved—aye, and still love—is Launcelot Osborne, the son of Lord Trentham."

"And he is engaged to be married," exclaimed Alice, "to the sister of Sylvester Casey!"

"What!" cried Imogen, starting with mingled indignation and astonishment: "that handsome and amiable young man to throw himself away upon the daughter of a griping money-lender—a notorious usurer?"

"It is as I tell you," rejoined Alice. "Ah! little did I think when just now listening to Sylvester's nonsensical chattering, I should learn anything that would be so vitally important for you to hear. But so it is; and Selina Casey was to call this afternoon at Trentham House to be introduced for the first time to the parents of her intended husband."

"Ah!" ejaculated Imogen, as everything in respect to her own adventure was now entirely cleared up. "How strange the coincidence! how wondrous! It almost seems preternatural that I should have been led to keep, as it were, the very appointment which was made for my rival!"

The two young women remained in discourse together for some little while longer,—Imogen Hartland narrating to her friend all that had happened at Trentham House, and Alice on the other hand detailing all the facts she had learnt from the lips of Sylvester Casey.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PARISH CLERK.

THE scene again shifts to the picturesque little village of Addington, at no great distance from Tunbridge Wells. It was evening—the evening of the Monday following next upon the

incidents of the two or three preceding chapters; and the old clerk of the village church was seated on the stile leading into the churchyard, enjoying the freshness of the breeze, and basking as it were in the slanting rays of the declining sun. Presently he beheld approaching towards him a young gentleman whose appearance riveted the old man's attention more and more as its object drew nearer to him. He seemed to be one of those exquisites whose existence is as peculiar to the metropolis as that of a bee is to a hive, and who, if they ever make their appearance in the provinces at all, seem only to have gone thither for the express purpose of astonishing the rustic natives.

The young gentleman to whom we are now alluding, was most elegantly dressed, was never was a white hat more admirable in its shape or more jauntily worn. It imparted an air of rakishness to a countenance whose features were somewhat feminine and delicate, despite the manly appurtenances of the whiskers and moustache. And what whirkers!—how glossy! how artistically curled! Then, as for the moustache—it needs particular description. It was not a great coarse moustache such as might be worn by a cavalry officer; but it was a slender line bowing the upper lip: it was glossy like the whiskers: and its pointed extremities were curled and twisted, as if the last finishing touch of a twirl had been given by the most fashionable of hairdressers or the most accomplished of valets. But though this moustache was exceedingly becoming,

truth nevertheless compels us to state that it looked uncommonly like one of those which decorate the upper lips of the waxen heads of gentlemen in hairdressers' windows. In all other respects the young gentleman to whom we are alluding, was equally well got up. His surtout-coat fitted without a wrinkle to the symmetry of his shape; but it seemed as if it were rather too much padded at the breast. The trousers were full and plated after the French fashion,—not being cut straight, but bulging verymuch all round the hips, and getting narrower and narrower towards the points where they terminated above the most elegant patent-leather boots that ever were worn. The shirt with its three chased gold studs—the waistcoat, fitting as faultlessly as the coat—and the light brown kid gloves, completely defining the shape of the small well-modelled hands—were all in keeping with the rest of his most elegant, fashionable, and attractive toilet.

The young gentleman carried a beautiful little riding-whip in his hand; and he had a slight swagger in his walk, as if he were on uncommonly good terms with himself, and as if the cruellest thing that could happen to him would be for any one to pass by without looking at him. By his gait one would fancy that he considered himself the very pink of dandyism. You would not call him a "swell;" he would strike you as being only a most fastidious gentleman. As he came along the path leading to churchyard stile, he flourished his riding-whip in a *nonchalant* fashion, cutting off the tops of the

long stalks of grass that were growing for hay, or the points of the young twigs sprouting from the hedge. Then as if very short-sighted, he thrust a quizzing-glass into the socket of his eye,—though from this circumstance it must not be supposed that we are giving another description of Sylvester Casey: for the subject of our present remarks was a very different being indeed from the vulgar *parvenu* who was introduced in the preceding chapter.

The old parish clerk started through his great spectacles at this phenomenon who was approaching him; for a phenomenon such an individual really was in the quiet little village of Addington. If at first bewildered and astonished, the clerk at length felt himself to be overawed; and he was at first about to get off the stile in order to make room for the young gentleman to pass, when the exquisite stranger said in a voice that was of velvety softness, "Don't move, my good man. Don't move! I am going to stop here and converse with you for a few minutes."

The old clerk took off his hat out of respect to one who addressed him in such a friendly patronizing style. The young gentleman told him to put on his hat again; and then drawing out his purse, which was very tiny and very elegant, with a quantity of sovereigns in one end and a very few pieces of silver in the other, he extracted some two or three of the latter coins, saying, "I observed a very excellent Ale-house in the village, and you will permit me to offer you the means of presently refreshing yourself there."

The old clerk was more and

more enchanted with his new acquaintance; and he thought that he could not do otherwise than at once enter upon certain personal explanations to one who suddenly displayed so deep an interest in him. So he proceeded to inform the young gentleman that "his name was Hogben—John Hogben at his service—that he would be sixty-three years old come next January—that he had been parish clerk thirty-nine years, ever since the death of his father (God rest his soul!) which lay under the yew tree on t'other side of the church—that he once used to be sexton as well as clerk, but that ever since he got the roomatiz in his limbs, he was obleeged to give up the digging of other peoples' graves, or else he would have been soon brought down into his own." Then having been thus communicative towards the young gentleman, Mr. Hogben's heart was moved, alike by his feelings and by the shillings he had consigned to his pocket, to be confidential. So he went on to say that "he liked his late wicar very much, but he didn't like the present one; nor more did a many more other people that he could name; and he thought it a very great pity the old one should ever have died—but it was the law of natur', and so he supposed there was no help for it."

Having arrived at this lucid conclusion, the old man took off his spectacles—wiped them—put them on again—and then regaled himself with another good luck at the stranger.

"And where is your vicar's house?" inquired this young gentleman.

"Just round behind the church here, sir," was the reply. "You see that stack of chimbleys above them trees? That's it."

"And that picturesque little cottage which I see yonder, in the other direction?" continued the young gentleman.

"That's the Dahlia cottage," replied the parish clerk. "Mr. and Mrs. Trevor lives there."

"Ah, that's where Mr. and Mrs. Trevor live?" ejaculated the exquisite stranger: and then with his left hand upon his hip, the riding-whip to his mouth, and the quizzing-glass stuck in his right eye he stood contemplating the cottage for upwards of a minute.

And all this while the old clerk was surveying the young gentleman; and he could not help thinking that there was a something strange but he could not exactly define what it was—in the mien or the costume, or the general appearance (he knew not which) of the exquisite stranger.

"How long have those Trevors lived there?" inquired the young gentleman, at length breaking silence.

"How long?" repeated Mr. Hogben. "Well let me see, Tim Gaffney was took up for sheep-stealing just close upon twenty months ago—"

The young gentleman could not help bursting out into a merry laugh, which was however so exceedingly musical that it seemed quite to charm the ears of the old man instead of making him angry; for he gazed with a half smiling expression of countenance upon the exquisite stranger.

"What on earth," cried the latter, "has Mr. Gaffney's being

taken up for sheep-stealing to do with the time that the Trevers have dwelt at that cottage?"

"Why, sir," responded the parish clerk, "I remember it was on the very same day that Tim Gaffney was took to maidstone Mr. Trevor comes to the village and takes Dahlia cottage—cause why, I recollect the two things was talked of together in the parlour up at the Red Lion that same evening."

"And which event seemed to be looked upon as the more important?" inquired the stranger, with a smile which the old clerk thought was very pleasing, and which revealed two such pure, and perfect rows of ivory that Mr. Hogben mentally ejaculated "Them teeth has never chawed bakkerl!"

"Why, you see sir," he continued, speaking audibly—"the cottage had been shut up for some time; and Mr. Fairbrass—that's the owner of it sir—began to despair of ever getting another tenant;—when, lo and behold! one evening the Harlequin comes in—"

"The Harlequin?" said the young gentleman, dubiously.

"Yes, sir—that's the coach which runs atwixt Maidstone and the Wells. So, when it comes in, Mr. Trevor comes along with it. He steps into the Red Lion; and he says, says he? 'Where does Mr. Fairbrass live?'—'That red brick house over the way, with the great brass knocker,' says the landlord says he. Then away goes Mr. Trevor to Mr. Fairbrass. 'You have advertised in yesterday's *Times*,' says he, 'a sweet little willa containing eight rooms with every convenience.'—"

'Besides kitchen and washus,' says Fairbrass,—'And a garding says Mr. Trevor, says he.—Yes, and a garding,' says Fairbrass says he. So then they go off together and look at it; and Mr. Trevor soon makes up his mind 'I'll take it,' says he.—'Werry good,' says Fairbrass. 'Rent forty pounds a year.'—'It's a bargain,' says Mr. Trevor.—'I shall want references, or a quarter in advance,' says Fairbrass!—Thereupon Mr. Trevor pulls out his purse and pays a whole twelvemonth in advance doesn't even wait for the receipt, but bids Fairbrass good day, and mounts the Harlequin again when it passes through on its way to maidstone.

"Then the bargain was soon settled? said the young stranger; and this Mr. Trevor seems a very off handed person. Well, what next?"

In two or three days the waggins comes with the furniture, pursued Hogben; "and everything was soon in apple-pie order. Then a poshay drives up to Dahlia Cottage, and Mr. Trevor hands out the beautifullest creture that ever was seen in Addington barring *your* presence, sir—for you are certainly the Prettiest man that I ever see come into the place: and there appeared to be something peculiar or significant in the glance and tone of the old clerk.

"Dont mind me" said the exquisite, somewhat impatiently "but go on. Your discourse interests me. The lady I suppose was Mr. Trevor?"

"Yes—Mr. Trevor's wife rejoined the clerk "she's quite the belle of the place.

"But she's not visited I presu-

me? said the young gentleman I "Mean that—of course—living in this secluded manner——"

"They don't want to be visited, and won't receive no company," said the clerk. They might have been called upon by the gentle folks in the neighbourhood; but they declined all society. They gave it out by some means or another—ah! I remember! it was through the wicar when he had that explanation with them; for of course it wasn't till *then* that people thought of visiting them: but when once that explanation was given.——"

"What explanation?" inquired the exquisite.

"Why, you see, sir," continued the parish clerk, "when the Trevors first came to live in the willage, there was many curious things said about 'em; and amongst others it was whispered that he lady wasn't the gentleman's wife. Well, time wore on—and about ten months ago Mrs. Trevor has a baby. Now, a baby, sir, must be christened; and Mr. Trevor speaks to our wicar about it; but the wicar having heerd the report that was afloat, wouldn't register the child in the name of Trevor unless he fust of all saw the parent's certificate of marriage."

"Ah!" ejaculated the stranger. "And what then? I suppose it was rather inconvenient to produce the certificate—eh?"

"Inconvenient?" exclaimed Mr. Hogben. "Not a hattom of it! The certificate was forth-comin' in no time."

"You mean to say *that*?" cried the young exquisite, suddenly turning right round upon the old clerk.

"To be sure I mean it, sir, But your manner is so singular—you gave a sort of start——"

"It was nothing my good man—only a twinge which seized upon me."

"Ah! it is the roomatiz, sir. Pray take care of it! I was laid up for three year——"

"Never mind how long you were laid up!" interjected the young exquisite petulantly. "You were telling me that the certificate was produced?"

"Of course it were," rejoined the old man; "and then, as soon as our wicar saw that they was raly married, he became all politeness—he offered to introduce Mrs. Pickstock—that's his wife—to Mrs. Trevor, and to mention to all the other families in the neighbourhood——"

"Well," interjected the young exquisite: "and then it was, I suppose, that Mr. Trevor signified his desire to live in seclusion?"

"Just so sir," answered the clerk.

"Well, but that certificate," proceeded the young stranger, on whose mind the discourse appeared to be making an impression which was something more than the mere casual interest that attends upon a passing gossip: "are you sure it was genuine one?"

"Geniwine, sir?" cried the old man, in astonishment at the implied doubt. "Do you think that Dr. Pickstock, with a red hood at his back, doesn't know what a geniwine certificate be? In course he do!—and I rayther think—but mind! I'm not sure—leastways I rayther think he know'd the incumbant at which signed it, and in consequence his handwriting."

The young dandy reflected profoundly; and then he said, "Did you happen to see the certificate?"

"In course I did sir. Why, I was in the westry at the time when Mr. Trevor produced it."

"Good God! how strange!"

"What did you say, sir?"

"Oh, nothing! I was only asking if you happened to recollect where Mr. and Mrs. Trevor were married?"

"Well, I don't know that I can exactly remember the place, replied the clerk; "for of course I didn't seize hold of the certificate and examine it just for all the world as if I thought it was a forgery——"

"A forgery? Ah! by the bye," said the young stranger, "such things are sometimes forged—are they not? We have heard of certificates of every kind being forged—matrimonial, baptismal, burial——"

"You seem to be getting excited, young sir," interrupted the parish clerk; and then, as he again scrutinizingly surveyed his querist, he went on to remark "I hope that I haven't been saying too much—the fact is, you have led me on—your manners is so insinuating—and then too there's summut about you—a hair of distinction—and raly it has two or three times struck me that if them whiskers and must-ashes was took away from your face, you'd be much more like ——"

"My good friend," interrupted the young exquisite, with crimson upon his cheeks, "never mind what I should be like or what I should be not like:" then drawing out his purse, he thence extracted a sovereign; and plac-

ing it in the old man's hand, he said, "I feel that I ought to recompense you well for all this tedious process of questionings to which I have subjected you. Keep on your hat, my worthy freind—it is not for advanced years such as yours are to show so much deference to comparative youthfulness such as I can boast of, you have still something more to tell me. The certificate whereof we were speaking,—do you happen to remember the place where it was signed, and where consequently it is supposed Mr. and Mrs. Trevor were married?"

"Supposed?" ejaculated Mr. Hogben, catching at the word which seemed to throw a doubt upon that marriage altogether; but then as he dropped the sovereign into his waistcoat-pocket, he said, "well it is not for an old man like me to look too deep into motives. You seem to be a young genelman—with coat, veskit, and breeches—and that's enough! Well sir, I'll take you as sich.

Now about that there certificate, rayther think—but mind I'm not quite sure—it come from Southdale."

"Southdale? To be sure!" ejaculated the young exquisite. "It is a village in Dorsetshire."

"Dorestshire, to be sure!" cried the old man. "I'll take a davy that was the county! But Ah!—and he now glanced towards Dahlia cottage at a little distance

The young gentleman turned his regards in the same direction and he beheld a lady approaching.

"That I presume, is Mrs. Trevor?"

"The same, sir," ejaculated Mr. Hogben.

"Ah! by the bye," pursued the

exquisite, suddenly recovering all his off-hand self-possession and easy air of indifference, "you forgot to tell me what sort of a looking person Mr. Trevor is".

"He is a tall young man, sir with dark hair and eyes—very handsome—I should think his age may be something between five-and-twenty and thirty——"

"Seven-and-twenty!" interjected the fashionable querist.

"Why, one would think that you knew a much of these people as I do!" exclaimed the parish clerk, "But I forgot! It's no business of mine," he immediately added, as the young gentleman again drew forth his purse, "You are paying me for my information," continued the old man, with a humiliated air; "and I must not say that my soul is my own. Well, sir, I dare say Mr. Trevor is about seven-and-twenty. I do not think he is in the village at this moment—I'm almost sure that I saw him atop of the Harlequin yesterday morning——"

"Enough, old man!" ejaculated the young exquisite. "I thank you for your information. The money I have already given you was to purchase it. This additional sum is to ensure your silence in respect to the questions that I have been putting to you."

Thus speaking, the delicately-gloved hands drew forth a couple of sovereigns from the tiny bead purse with the silver slides—and with a friendly nod the donor passed loungingly away from the spot.

"Well," said the old man to himself, as he very comfortably consigned the extra donation to

his waistcoat-pocket, which could have stowed away a couple of hundred of them: if ever I saw a man that looked like a woman, you are the one;"

He continued to weigh this reflection as the young exquisite strolled along the path towards Mrs. Trevor; who was advancing from the opposite direction.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DISCOURSE AT THE GATE.

MRS. TREVOR, who was dressed with that simple elegance which invariably characterized her toilet was taking an evening walk, having seen her beloved infant consigned to its cradle of repose. Her eyes were bent downward—for she was thinking of her Alfred, who had departed from Addington on the preceding day, precisely as Mr. Hogben had informed the young stranger. Not that Ethel was unhappily pensive or gloomily thoughtful: because, after the visit to London, upwards of ten days back, she had every reason to be happy and contented at the proofs which Alfred had afforded her of his pecuniary prosperity. But he had again gone away for one of those periods of indefinite absence which were longer than the intervals that he devoted to her at Dahlia Cottage; and she was thinking to herself how long the time might be ere his return.

All of a sudden she heard foot steps approaching; and raising her eyes, she beheld a fashionably-dressed young gentleman contemplating her with his quizz-

zing-glass in a style which at once struck her to be most superciliously impertinent. Ethel was virtue itself—she was propriety personified: therefore, innocent and artless though she were, she was the very first to feel any insult that might appear to be directed against her womanly modesty. Her immediate impulse now was to turn abruptly round and retreat to the cottage: but a second thought induced her to continue her way. It struck her in a moment that it was a species of conduct which she ought not to seem to recognise, and that it would be time enough to resent it if it assumed a more overt shape. Besides, it was still daylight—the sun had not as yet set—she caught a glimpse of the old parish clerk seated upon the church-yard stile at a little distance—and in the adjacent field there were two or three labourers returning from their work. She therefore flattered herself that the exceeding insolence of the fashionably-dressed stranger's regards would be limited to its present bounds.

But she was mistaken. The young exquisite, still retaining his glass up to his eye, said in a taunting, jeering voice, "Oh! Oh! Mrs. Trevor—eh? Do let me have a look at you! They say you are the *belle* of the place."

Ethel's countenance became crimson, and the fire of indignation flashed from those beautiful hazel eyes which were usually so clam and soft in their expression.

A laugh which was strangely musical in its mockery, rang from the lips of the young stranger, and he continued his way, appar-

rently satisfied with the amount of insult which he had thus thrown upon the amiable and inoffensive young lady. Nay, more—he almost instantaneously repented of it: for scarcely had he hastened onward fifty yards when he ejaculated with an expression of countenance which showed how angry he was with himself, "Fool that I have been to interfere with the creature!"

Meanwhile poor Ethel's sudden paroxysm of indignation had yielded to one of deep mental distress; and she felt afflicted as every modest woman does under such circumstances, at the thought that her own appearance and her natural good intentions should not have been sufficient to defend her from insult. She could not continue her walk: she wished to be at home that she might at least be shielded by its walls from the possibility of further aggression from the same quarter. She glanced around the impertinent young coxcomb as she naturally took him to be was striking into another path leading to the village; and thus in a few instants the open road was left clear to her to seek Dahlia Cottage.

What was her surprise and how great was her joy, when on reaching her habitation she beheld Alfred himself coming forth to greet her! She flew towards him:—another moment and she was clasped in his arms!

"Oh, what a happy surprise, dearest husband!" she fervidly exclaimed,

"And equally happy for me, beloved Ethel, that I am enabled thus to return to you for a few days!"

"Then you were not wanted

n London so soon as you fancied?"

"No," he rejoined. "But good heavens, Ethel! how pale and agitated you are! Something has happened! Good God! what is it? Do tell me!"

"Nothing! nothing, Alfred!" she exclaimed: and she nestled all the more closely to his bosom, as if to that of a beloved protector who had most unexpectedly returned at the very instant when his presence was invoked.

"Do not say that it is nothing my dear girl!" interposed her husband. "You are all trembling and quivering! Ethel, I *must* know what this is!"—and he himself now appeared to be sized with much trepidation and emotion.

I cannot disobey you, Alfred, I must tell you the truth when you thus adjure me! I have been insulted."

"Insulted Ethel? echoed Trevor his handsome countenance flushing with indignation, "who would dare insult you? Tell me dearest! tell me! This is a point that I *must* know and *must* have cleared up!"

"Oh, do not for an instant believe Alfred," said the young lady greatly distressed, "that by any look on my part——"

"Good Heavens!—no!" he exclaimed. "Sooner would I believe that the sun itself would cease to shine than that *you* would fling a glance of encouragement upon the libertine! Who has insulted you, Ethel?"

A few words of explanation were quickly given; and then the young lady added in an imporing tone as she saw the angry start which her husband gave, "Oh do not take any notice of it! It is

passed—and *you* are here! If you go—my God! there will be a duell I shudder when I think of it!"

"Ethel dearest!" cried Trevor, "be clam! be firm! There are insults which cannot be passed over—and this is one! I must investigate it. The person whom you have depicted must be some wretched fop across whose back I will lay a horsewhip, but who is by no means likely to have the courage to meet me as a man of honour! Ethel, do not detain me! If I were a coward in such a case, you would have a right to say that I do not love you!"

With these words, Trevor imprinted a fervid though hasty kiss upon Ethel's lips; and then he darted forth from the apartment. At the same time he caught down his hat from a peg in the hall, he snatched up a riding whip—and in a few moments he was outside the garden gate.

The dusk was now closing in: the sun had set—the twilight of the early part of May was redeeming the landscape from a deeper obscurity. Trevor bent his hurried steps towards the village; for the cottage, he it remembered, was a little apart on the outskirt; and he soon caught sight of a person leaning against a gate and gazing in the direction of that cottage. A glance at the appearance of the individual satisfied him that it was the very one of whom he was in search and of whom Ethel had spoken. And now that young stranger himself, on catching a glimpse of Trevor, quickly averted his regards; and bending forward over the gate, instead of leaning with his back against it,

seemed suddenly to become very intent on surveying the field with which the gate itself communicated.

"Ah! ha!" thought the indignant Trevor to himself: "he suspects that I am one who has an account to settle with him! He pretends not to see me; he hopes I shall pass him by unrecognised. He is evidently a coward."

Another moment, and Alfred was by the side of the young stranger at the gate. But now the exquisite appeared to be very far from being inspired by terror; and turning slowly round, he again leant languishingly with his back to the gate, twirling his moustache with an air of supercilious defiance. There was something fell well calculated on the part of that feminine, foppish, yet inimitable representative of dandyism to enhance to the very utmost the indignation of the high-spirited Trevor; and holding his whip in a menacing manner, he said, "May I ask, sir, whether it was you who just now wantonly insulted a young lady whom you met at no great distance from the church?"

The young exquisite made no answer; but it struck Alfred that a low derisive laugh sounded from his lips.

"By heaven, sir!" exclaimed Trevor, "the more you provoke me, the severer shall be the chastisement which I will inflict. The amplest apology——"

"Very well, then," said the young stranger; "let me make the apology to the lady herself, and in your presence."

Trevor was struck by the sound of the voice; he even gave a quick galvanic start: but in-

stantaneously regaining his self-possession, he mentally ejaculated, "The idea is ridiculous."

"No, sir," he continued, speaking audibly; "you shall not be admitted into the presence of the young lady whom you so grossly insulted. You will apologize to me here—upon his spot!"

"And if I refuse?" said the young exquisite coolly.

Again Trevor started at the sound of that voice: but again feeling convinced that the sort of suspicion it engendered was ridiculous, he answered sternly, "If you refuse, I will lay this whip across your back."

"Oh, indeed!" said the young fashionable, still with a most provoking coolness; and sticking the quizzing-glass in his eye, he added, "But, you see, I also carry a whip; and perhaps I may know how to use it as well as yourself."

While he was thus speaking, he lounged against the gate in such a posture, that whatsoever remained of the twilight defined his profile completely to the view of Alfred Trevor. This gentleman contemplated that profile with a growing interest that rapidly increased into consternation and dismay: but all in a moment the exquisite averted his face again—and Trevor with an infinite sense of relief, ejaculated to himself, "Pshaw! it is preposterous!"

"Now, sir," continued the young stranger, "you have not answered my last remark. I said that I also carried a whip—and I warn you that if you touch me with yours, I will thrash you soundly with mine."

This time the voice sounded differently from before; and Trevor, still smarting under the sense

of the insult offered to Ethel, exclaimed, "The matter must be settled in another way. If you refuse as a gentleman to apologize remember that there are such things as pistols."

The fashionable stranger burst out into the merriest laugh—a laugh as musical and as silvery as that which had ere now so completely ravished the ears of the old parish clerk,—a laugh that was clear as metallic sound—as pure and as gushing as the rippling flow of a streamlet. Again did Trevor give a quick galvanic start: again did his eyes scrutinizingly survey the features of the young stranger,—whom, however, he began to look upon as very far from being a stranger to him; and then, as suspicion became conviction, he said in a hollow tone and with dismayed looks, "My God! is it really you?"

"Yes—'tis I," answered the disguised lady—for such she indeed was, as the reader has no doubt already full well surmised: and now she spoke altogether in her natural voice, which she had previously disguised as much as possible. "Yes—'tis I, Herbert!"

A groan came from the lips of Trevor—and he staggered against the gate for support. At length suddenly recovering his self-possession, he assumed an air of haughty defiance; and he said, "Well, I confess that I keep a mistress here. I know not by what accident you may have discovered it: but at all events you can now judge for yourself whether I have not studied to envelope the fact in so much mystery as to avoid creating a scandal in the world. I am not the only man who is thus crimi-

nal, if actual fault there be in it: and perhaps you would do well to let the affair continue shrouded in this obscurity?"

"Oh, Ethel is your mistress—eh?" said the lady, in an ironical tone. "Judging by her appearance, Dorsetshire may boast of very beautiful women—and South dale perhaps may produce the loveliest of all."

Trevor became ghastly pale, all his hardihood and assurance forsook him in a moment; and again staggering against the gate, it was also again in a hollow voice that he said, "Why those allusions? what is it that you know? Speak out, I entreat you! At all events let there be thorough understanding between us!"

"You ask me what I know," said the lady; "and I reply that I know *all*! It was not for nothing that I was just now engaged in an hour's chat with the garrulous old parish clerk——"

"Ah!"—and Trevor at once understood to what extent the revelation of Mr. Hogden might have gone, and how far he himself was compromised thereby. "Now permit me to offer a few words of explanation," he went on to observe. "Doubtless the clerk spoke to you of a marriage certificate——"

"Precisely so. He was in the vestry when you displayed that certificate to the vicar."

"Oh! and you can doubtless comprehend," ejaculated Trevor "how to satisfy the scruples of that clergyman, who refused to christen the infant in a particular name until he received a certain proof—you can comprehend, I say, how I manufactured a certificate——"

"Ah! was it so?" ejaculated the lady, who did not seem prepared for this explanation: and then she murmured to herself. "Well it may be so!"

"It was comparatively easy," continued Trevor, "to cheat the vicar with a fabricated certificate—the offence was a very venial one—it injured nobody—whereas, on the other hand, it saved certain feelings from being too deeply wounded—"

"Enough, Herbert! enough!" interjected the lady. "You need not tell me how considerate you have been on account of the feelings of that woman!"

Trevor started, and an angry flush passed over his countenance; for he keenly and poignantly felt the terrible insult which was thus suddenly levelled against his Ethel. But he knew himself to be powerless to avenge it: he even felt that it would be imprudent to notice it more than he had involuntarily done; and he said in as quiet a tone as he could command. "I will see you to-morrow; and whatsoever you may wish to be done under existing circumstances—whatsoever stipulations you have to make——"

"Not to-morrow," said the lady. "I shall not be in London."

"Where then shall you be? Are you going to——"

"I am going on a little journey," she interrupted him, "which will perhaps occupy me for two or three days."

"Ah! a journey?" said Trevor. "And might I venture to inquire whither you are thus going? Not that I assert the remotest right to control your actions—no nor even to question them——"

"Oh, there is no secret," inter-

jected the lady, in respect to the journey which I am about to undertake. I am going into a county where you passed a few months some two years ago; and it was no wonder," she added, throwing a tincture of irony into the silver melody of her voice that you should have written up at the time to tell me what a delightful neighbourhood it was—how much you were enjoying yourself, and how happy you were——"

"Ah! I understand the allusion," said Trevor. "In plain terms, you mean that you are going into Dorsetshire?"

"I am. It will be a nice trip."

"And—and—which part of Dorsetshire?" faltered forth Trevor.

"Oh, Southdale of course," rejoined the lady.

Trevor reflected for a few moments; and then, in a voice which again sounded hollow even to his own ears, and with pale careworn looks, he said, "You are determined to follow this up to the very uttermost. Well, I confess that I am in your power. And now deal with me as you will."

"Ah, then, you propose to save me the journey into Dorsetshire?" cried the lady. "Well, this is very kind of you, and shall be duly taken into account. We may therefore meet to-morrow, as you have just now proposed—and you will then have the kindness to sign a certain paper which I shall in the meanwhile have drawn up."

"Yes—any thing! everything!" ejaculated Trevor, with a tone and look of grateful eagerness. "Name any thing else that you will—anything that I can do——"

"I do not know that there will be anything else," answered the lady coolly and carelessly. "And now farewell."

With these words she sauntered away from the spot; and Trevor remained leaning against the gate giving way to his painful reflections. The dusk was deepening around him: but, Oh! if any one could have beheld his features at that moment, they would have revealed an expression of almost mortal anguish—betraying the intensity of the affliction which had seized upon his soul. At length he began slowly to retrace his way to the cottage, exerting efforts that were well-nigh preter-human to master his feelings and compose his looks.

Meanwhile the disguised lady, instead of entering the village, struck off into a path which diverged from the commencement of the little street; and at a distance of about a hundred and fifty yards up that narrow shady lane a horse and gig were standing; while a man, who was in charge of the equipage, lay upon the grassy bank, smoking his pipe. On hearing approaching footsteps, he rose up; and as he beheld the seeming young gentleman emerge from the surrounding obscurity, he exclaimed, "Why, sir, I thought you was never coming!"

"I have been detained much longer than I anticipated," replied the lady. "But I told you at the outset that you were to wait, no matter how long—and that you should be liberally rewarded."

"Oh, I wasn't afeerd of that, sir," said the man, who had the air of an ostler in a somewhat

decayed and seedy state.

The lady took her seat in the gig, observing, "We shall soon accomplish the dozen miles between this and Maidstone."

"Werry soon, sir," said the man, as he took the driver's seat; and then flicking his horse with the whip, he added, "The mare is a good'un, and gets over the ground in deuced good style."

The equipage sped along; and about half an hour passed during which the disguised lady was almost completely absorbed in her reflections; and she occasionally acknowledged with a monosyllable the remarks which the man went on making in a garrulous strain upon the weather, the crops, the horse that he had ever had anything to do with in the course of his life—and they were not a few.

The idea presently began to creep into the mind of the disguised lady that the road was narrower and more lonely than when she had pursued it on coming from Maidstone two or three hours previous. She therefore began to look about her; and as the moon was now coming out with all its argentine brilliancy, the landscape was sufficiently lighted to enable her to contemplate all objects within a certain distance. The longer she surveyed the features of the scene, the more was she convinced that it was a different route which was being taken, from that by which she had been brought to Addington. But then, might it not be a nearer one. She was determined to put the question.

"I suppose," she said, with an assumed air of confidence "that this bye-lane affords a shor-

ter cut than the regular road?"

"Eh?" said the man, eyeing the lady askance. "Ain't this the main road?"

She felt as if her heart were leaping up into her mouth as the conviction smote her that the man had some nefarious purpose in view; and she now for the first time remarked the sinister expression of his countenance. She swept her eyes around: she beheld some building in the distance ahead—and her resolve was in a moment taken. She would wait till she got opposite that building, and then she would suddenly throw herself out of the gig—or else desire the man to stop on some pretext—anything, in short, so as to place herself in the way of invoking protection or assistance. But in order to conceal her design, she said in a careless tone, "Oh, I thought this might be a bye-road; but as I have never travelled it before to-day, 'tis no wonder that I should be mistaken."

Again the man eyed her askance: but he said nothing.

The road now went down a gradual descent into a valley, through the bottom of which meandered a stream, which looked like an enormous serpent shining like quicksilver beneath the rays of the bright moon: The disguised lady now perceived that the river passed close by the very building which she was keeping in view; and as the gig approached it still nearer, she conjectured from the shape and position of the edifice that it must be a water-mill.

"It was down there," said the man, pointing with his whip, that the young o'man was murdered by her sweetheart three

years ago."

"Murdered?" ejaculated the lady, with a cold shudder.

"Yes—and ever since the old mill has been shut up——"

"Shut up?" echoed the lady, her cherished hope suddenly vanishing, and dismay seizing upon her.

"Yes—didn't I say *shut up*?" demanded the man, whose tone and demeanour seemed to become every instant more threatening and sinister. "Well, sir, as I was saying, ever since the mill has been shut up the folks say it has been haunted by the ghost of the young o'man which was so cruelly murdered by the miller's man. But ghost or no ghost, it wouldn't prevent *me* from going into the mill if I wanted to do so; and whether in the middle of the day or the middle of the night it would be all one to Tim Gaffney."

An jaculation of mingled astonishment and affright burst from the lips of the disguised lady; for she instantaneously recollected that this was the very name which the old parish clerk had mentioned in a manner that had elicited from her lips a peal of such musical laughter. A wild terror now seized upon her: her brain appeared to reel: She knew not what course to adopt—when all in a moment the man pulled in the horse, just as the gig reached the middle of a bridge which spanned the stream.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MILL.

"WHAT are you going to do?" asked the lady in an almost dying voice.

"Why, there's no use in mincing the matter for another moment," replied Gaffney. "You've shown so much curiosity about this mill here, that I'm going to treat you to a look at the inside of it."

A cry of terror pealed forth from the lady's lips—and she made an effort to spring out of the gig but it failed, for her arm was instantaneously seized upon by the strong vigorous grasp of Tim Gaffney, who at the same time exclaimed, in a threatening voice and with a terrible oath, "If you try to run away I'll do for you as sure as the miller's man did for the poor girl in the mill close by."

The unfortunate lady was now paralyzed with horror and though the ruffian released her arm from the vice-like grasp in which for a few moments he had clutched it, yet she dared not renew the attempt to save herself by flight; for he saw that she was indeed completely in his power. He coolly drew forth and displayed a brace of pistols, at the same time remarking, "your best plan is to be quiet and do as you're bid."

"My God! would you murder me?" faltered out the unhappy lady.

"If I wanted to do it, I should 'nt have taken the trouble to give you any sort of warning to be quiet," responded Tim Gaffney: "but I should have done the business at once."

He now whistled in a peculiar manner; and the sound, which was very loud and shrill, penet-

rated through the lady's brain. In a few moments she distinctly heard the sound of a door opening somewhere about the premises; for the gig had halted close by the old mill, which, consisting of a mass of woodwork all tarred over, had a gloomy and ominous appearance. The lady now felt convinced that Gaffney was summoning other ruffians to his assistance; and the dread idea struck her that they might not prove so merciful in respect to her life as he had proclaimed himself to be.

"For heaven's sake, drive on; or else let me go!" she said in an imploring voice. "Tell me what you require. My purse—my jewellery——"

"Hold your tongue, young lady!" exclaimed Gaffney, now for the first time showing by his speech that he was aware of her real sex.

At this moment a man was seen crossing a plank which lay above a stream branching off from the river; for that plank formed a means of communication betwixt the road and the mill. As this individual emerged from the obscurity, the lady, whose terrified looks were rapidly thrown upon him, perceived that he was a middle-sized, stoutly-built fellow, dressed in a velveteen shooting jacket and dark trousers; and he carried a thick stick in his hand.

"Now then, Bill, look alive!" said Gaffney. "There's one of the fair sex dressed up as a man! Now then, young lady, you get out and follow my friend Bill Bax; and he'll introduce you into the mill, where I shall have the pleasure of joining you as soon as I've put the trap into the

outhouse——”

“What!—go with him? Into the mill?” shrieked the lay. No no! you may kill me first!”

Another terrible oath came from Tim Gaffney’s lips as he exclaimed, “You *shall* go, young lady! or else”—and he again produced his pistols, “Take my advice, and don’t have none of your nonsense. I tell you again we don’t want your life: but we want your money—and that we mean to have.”

“Then take it! take it!” cried the lady, presenting her purse, which she tore forth from her pocket with all the vehemence of nervous haste.

“No one ever ought to refuse a good offer,” said Bill Bax, as he took the purse from the hand of the disguised lady, whom he had been attentively contemplating for the last few minutes. “But you must come along with me all the same—’cause why, there’s a little paper you must just sign inside the mill. Isn’t that the dodge, Tim?”

“It is,” answered Gaffney; “and if the lady stands talking and bothering any longer in the middle of the road, I’m hanged if I don’t put an end to the whole business at once by blowin’ her brains out!”

“You swear that my life is safe?” demanded the lady, regaining some portion of her lost self-possession as she perceived the absolute necessity of yielding obedience to the ruffians who had her in their power.

“I’ve told you so more than once,” replied Tim Gaffney.

“Lead on,” said the disguised lady to Bill Bax; “and I will follow.”

“Well, I rather think you had

better go in front, ma’am,” said that individual: and he just examined for a moment the knob at the end of his bludgeon, as if significantly to let the captive know that it might be dangerous for her to make the slightest attempt at escape.

Without another word the lady began to cross the plank; and she reached a little low door opening into the mill. It stood ajar; and Bill Bax, who had followed her closely, told her to push it. She did so; and he then bade her walk in. But she stopped short. Within the place a deep darkness prevailed; and the lady’s heart was smitten with terror at the idea of crossing that threshold.

“Move on!” said Bax gruffly, at the same time pushing her from behind, so that she was perforce compelled to enter the building.

He was close at her heels; she heard the door shut; and now she was entombed in the most stupendous darkness, in the midst of which she was alone with that ruffian! So dire a terror seized upon her that her quivering limbs were about to give way and fail completely, when the sharp crack of a lucifer-match sounded upon her ears and a light flamed upon her view. It appeared that the man Bax had a candle close at hand; and the lady felt as if a great weight were all in a moment lifted from her mind. She glanced upon the fellow’s face; he was a middle-aged man, with a shallow complexion, large overhanging eyebrows, and a very wide mouth. Ugly almost to repulsiveness, his appearance was even more sinister than

that of his friend and accomplice Tim Gaffney. Nevertheless, as he was now lighting a candle, instead of preparing to murder her in the dark, the lady felt considerably reassured; and the hope arose within her that her life was indeed safe and that her liberty could only be compromised for a short time.

She looked around: she was in a little passage, whence a steep narrow staircase led upward, a rope serving as a substitute for a handrail.

"Go on, ma'am, if you please," said Bax, whose voice was naturally surly in its tone, and whose mode of speaking was coarse and peremptory. "I've lighted this here candle for your accommodation; and you'll therefore have the goodness to make use of it without any more delay."

She ascended the staircase, and then found herself in a room where there were portions of the huge massive machinery of the mill; and still Mr. Bax, who kept close at her heels, bade her move on. She traversed the room, at the opposite extremity of which there was a door; and this led into another compartment where there was another ascent of steps. These the disguised lady mounted: another room was reached—and then a complete labyrinth of places formed by different portions of the machinery, was threaded, until a light was seen emanating from a door that stood half open.

"Now," said Bax, with a grim smile, "let me do the honours of my own house. Walk in: though it isn't everybody that would introduce such a dashing young park as you are to one's wife."

"Thus speaking, Bax led the way into a room, where there were some few little articles of furniture—such as a bed, a table, three or four chairs, some crockery, and culinary articles. A woman of an aspect even more repulsive than that of Mr. Bax himself rose up from her seat as soon as the door opened; and as her husband whispered something in her ear, she immediately began to contemplate the disguised lady with wonder and curiosity.

"Well, it wouldn't have struck me at first," she said, "unless you had given me the hint,"—and she turned towards her husband. "But what does it mean?"

"You'll see all about it presently," answered Bax. "Tim's here."

"Oh, then, that was *his* whistle?" said the woman.

Bax nodded an affirmative; and the disguised lady thought to herself, "Then it must be a complete gang of ruffians into the midst of whom I have fallen. God help me!"

Still, however, she hugged the belief that her life was safe; for there was something reassuring in the presence of a female, even though it was as repulsive a specimen of the sex as Mrs. Bax.

"Sit down and make yourself at home, ma'am," said the man, as he extinguished the candle which he had brought in his hand, for there was another burning on the table. "You see," he continued, "it don't do to have much light. The people in the neighbourhood have already seen it more than once."

"Well, Bill, and so much the better!" ejaculated his wife; for

they spread the report that the mill's haunted, and so no one comes to interfere with us."

"Ah! but if a light was seen burning regularly," rejoined Bax, "there might be some of the farmers in the neighbourhood that wouldn't exactly believe it was the doing of ghosts, and would come with a dozen or so of their men to root out whoever they might find here. For they would soon get it into their heads that there was tramps, or thieves secreted in the old mill.

"Well, well," said the woman, "you've taken precaution enow with them shutters all covered over with brown paper pasted over every cranny and crevice. —But I say," she added, suddenly lowering her tone and drawing her husband a little aside; are we right to talk in this way in the presence of the stranger?"

"Oh, I daresay there is no harm in it," replied Bax. "You know that Tim Gaffney is a shrewd wide awake fellow; and he wouldn't have brought the lady here unless he had some strong hold over her and could bind her to silence. However, we shall see in a few minutes. He has just gone to put the horse and gig up in the shed."

While the man and woman were whispering, the disguised lady watched them with the intensest anxiety, though she did not appear to be doing so; for every movement and every look aye, and every word that she might by any possibility catch, was of importance to one in her situation. At length footsteps were heard approaching — Bax hastened to open the door — and Tim Gaffney made his appearance.

"What a confounded breaks neck place it is to grope one's way about in the dark!" he grumbled forth. "Howsomever, it's dangerous to have a light. Now, Bill, put out the bingoo and let's get to business."

The disguised lady gave a sudden start; for she thought that the word "bingo" might possibly be a synonym for "candle," and that therefore the extinction of the one remaining light was contemplated. On this score, therefore, her mind was relieved when she saw Mr. Bax open small cupboard and take out a bottle of brandy and some glasses.

"Do you do anything in this way, ma'am?" asked Tim Gaffney, as he filled one of the glasses.

Notwithstanding the circumstances in which she was placed, the disguised lady averted her looks in disgust from the ruffian who thus addressed her; and then, in a tone of sudden excitement, she exclaimed, "Keep me not in suspense! tell me why you have brought me hither! What is it that you demand? what paper is it that I am to sign? or was that only a pretext?"

"We didn't want no pretext," replied Gaffney, "when we had got you so completely in our power. But now, ma'am, we will get to business. We are no more inclined for any unnecessary delay than you are. So in order to make a beginning just tell us your name."

"My name? No, you cannot want to know it."

"Very well, keep it to yourself," responded Tim Gaffney: "but if you don't choose to let us see your name at the bottom

of a cheque, you must put it inside a note that you will have to write to some friend, ordering that five hundred guineas are to be given to the bearer and no questions asked."

"Yes—I will do this," answered the lady; and it was almost with a tone of cheerful gaiety that she spoke. "I will write a letter to my bankers—But they live in London, remember!"

"So much the worse for you," remarked Gaffney. "Have you no friend in the neighbourhood to whom you could apply?"

"None," answered the disguised lady. "I am a perfect stranger in this part of the country."

"Well, then," pursued Gaffney, "it must be a letter upon your London bankers. I will lose no time in running up to London—I'll undertake to be at the bank the moment it opens to-morrow morning at nine o'clock; and then—let me see?—by one o'clock in the afternoon I'll be back here again. I can use the rail all the way from London to Chatham—"

"Good heavens," exclaimed the lady, "you surely do not mean me to stay here until you return?"

"In course we do," answered Gaffney, "Why, seeing you toggled out in this style, I took you for a shrewd, cunning, wide-awake kind of a young lady; and therefore I am surprised to find that you think us such precious flats as to part with you before we get hold of the ransom-money. Nothing of the sort! Here you stay till it's paid!"

"But you shall see the letter, all except my signature?" cried the lady; "and I will pledge myself in the most solemn man-

ner not to give any counter-instructions!"

"It won't do, ma'am," said Tim Geffney: and Bill Bax shook his head in a knowing manner at the same time. "We daresay you are a young lady of honour: but we'd rather not trust to mere promises. Mrs. Bax will do her best to make you comfortable; and after all, it's only a little temporary inconvenience to which you are going to be put."

The lady was perfectly dismayed at the idea of having to pass a night in that gloomy place and with such dreadful people: she almost wrung her hands in despair; and after a few moments' bewildering reflection, she exclaimed, "Take all my jewellery! Here is my watch!—it cost fifty guineas!—here is my chain—here are my rings! See! these are diamonds!—and I swear most solemnly that their value is not less than two hundred pounds!"

"Oh, but we meant to have them into the bargain," said Tim Gaffney. "The ransom-money is quite another thing. And now please to observe, ma'am, that the more you delay the business the longer you'll have to remain in this place."

"You shall not keep me here!" she cried, starting up in feverish excitement from the seat which she had taken. "I insist upon being restored to liberty! There are all my jewels! Now let me depart! Do not drive me to desperation! I will rend the entire place with my screams! I will shriek on and on until succour comes! Do you hear me?"

"I hear ma'am," said Tim

coolly; "but you're only wasting precious time in mere idle talk. Look here!"

He went to a corner of the room, stooped down, and catching hold of an iron ring raised a trap-door.

"There!" he said; "that goes right down to the ground-floor: there is no break between! It's where the sacks used to be hoisted up and down. Here's the rope still. So you see ma'am that if you made any inconvenient notice you could be very quickly disposed of."

The unhappy lady recoiled in horror from the dark mouth of the abyss; and Tim Gaffney, closing trap-door, returned to his seat, refilled his glass, and inquired coolly, "well, how is it to be?"

"They would not dare take my life!" thought the lady to herself: "it would be such a needless crime" — then speaking in an audible manner, she said, "I will not submit to your terms! I have given you my purse and my jewels but I will give now no more! Let me depart."

"Nay, young lady—this nonsense won't do with us, replied Gaffney, producing a pistol from his pocket.

"Are you not afraid that punishment will overtake you," she exclaimed: "do you not think that you would do well to conciliate me somewhat? Let me depart—and I swear most solemnly that I will not merely send you five hundred guineas to any address that you may name, but I will also keep the seal of silence on my lips in reference to the whole proceedings! But if on the other hand you drive me to extremes does it not occur to you that I may

prove vindictive——"

"That's enough, young lady!" interrupted Tim Gaffney: "you don't seem to comprehend how the matter stands—and therefore I must tell you. If we were afraid of your peaching against us—giving a description of our persons—and having us advertised, or what not,—why, we would very soon put you out of the way. But that is not our game!—for you won't say a word about this adventure, for your own sake! We know we're quite safe on that score. A young and handsome lady, going gallivanting about the country in man's clothes, isn't after any good: and such being the case, you'll keep the whole matter to yourself. Perhaps you have a husband or a father; or a brother, or some one that you would not dare have the thing known to. As soon as I discovered that you was a lady in disguise, I thought to myself that you must be rich, and perhaps of distinction. At all events I knew it was a perfect safe game that I meant to play; and that's all about it. But, pon my soul, you are so well got up, ma'am, in that dandified dress—that I really did not at first suspect you was anything but what you seemed—a very pretty young gentleman—until just as we were getting close into Addington—and then, if you remember, I happened to touch you on the bosom with my elbow as you was sitting by my side in the gig; and then you drew back so suddenly, that what with one thing and another I suspected the truth. But come! all this is mere idle talk, and time is passing."

"You refuse to suffer me to leave this place?" demanded the lady.

"We have already told you as much," responded Gaffney.

"I will send you a thousand guineas instead of five hundred, if you will let me go!"

"If you hold out much longer, we shall make the ransom-money a thousand guineas instead of five hundred."

The lady again literally wrung her hands in despair; and it was with the greatest difficulty she could prevent herself bursting into tears and giving vent to a flood of passionate weeping.

"Good God!" she cried, "do put faith in me! do trust in me, I conjure you! You, who are of my own sex," she continued, turning towards Mrs. Bax, "will surely take compassion upon me?"

The woman shook her head; and Tim Gaffney said, "Now, ma'am, be kind enough to finish the business at once. From this place you shall not stir until our conditions are fulfilled. Have you got any writing-paper, Bill?"

"Well, it's as much as I have," responded the man. "Howsoever—"

"There is a sheet of paper, a new pen, and a piece of sealing-wax in the cupboard!" exclaimed the woman.

She produced the articles; and the disguised lady, seeing that there was no help for it, prepared to write the letter. With a deep sigh she took up the pen and she wrote these lines, addressing them to a certain eminent banking establishment in the Strand:—"Pay the bearer five hundred guineas, without asking any

questions, and without a moment's delay. To convince you that the signature is genuine, I will mention the fact that the last cheque which I drew was on the 2nd of the present month."

"There!" she said, passing the letter to Tim Gaffney: "you may now read what I have written before I append my signature."

"It is all right," said Tim. "And now, although I don't want to see what name it is, yet you will please to write it in such a way that I may tell from this distance that you put nothing else in the letter except your name. There! that's" right he added, as the disguised lady, taking back the paper, affixed her autograph.

She then folded up the letter carefully; and she sealed it with one of the rings which she had just taken from her fingers, and which bore a crest.

"Now," said Tim, "I hope you've made sure, ma'am that this money will be paid and that I shan't get into any trouble by presenting the letter not with standing the orders you have given inside. Because look you, ma'am—I'm going to take certain precautions; and therefore if you are playing me any trick—or if you hope that this letter will lead to my arrest, you had better think well of it before it is too late. Bill," he continued, turning to his accomplice Bax, "I shall take Jack Peppercorn up to London with me. If all's well, you'll see me here again to-morrow at about one o'clock in the afternoon. But if there's anything wrong with me, you'll see Jack instead; and then you'll be guided by circum-

stances. For don't you see, ma'am," he added, again addressing himself to the lady, "if I am nabbed, *you* shall never come forward as a witness against me."

"I thought you just now said," interjected the lady, "that you felt strong enough in your own position, because you were certain that from motives of fear and of prudence I should not dare speak of adventures wherein I have figured in male apparel."

"Very true, ma'am," rejoined Gaffney: "but it's a habit with us to make sure doubly sure. And now I'm off."

The fellow took up his hat: and making a bow to the lady, he just nodded his head to Bax and the women, and took his departure.

"What can we do for you, ma'am?" asked Mrs. Bax, as soon as Tim Gaffney was gone. "Will you, take some supper? You can only have things in the rough here; and it's easy to tell by your looks that you are accustomed to a better style."

The lady had fallen into a profound meditation the instant the door had closed behind Tim Gaffney; and she did not immediately answer the questions thus put to her. She nevertheless heard them; for all in a moment she gave a start, saying, "Yes, I will take some refreshment."

The woman produced some bread, cold meat, cheese, and butter from the cupboard; and she spread a cloth upon the table. The disguised lady watched these preparations; and when they were completed, she said, "Could you give me some water?"

The man and woman looked at each other; and the lady saw that Mrs. Bax shook her head.

"Come, this is all nonsense!" growled her husband in a surly tone. "Go and get a pitcher of water. Besides, somebody must go down to make the door fast—and you may as well do it."

"I won't, Bill," she replied, emphatically. "*You* go. Just leave me *that*,"—and she glanced at the club-stick—"and I'll take care that——"

She said no more, but looked significantly towards the prisoner.

"Now I say you *shall* go!" exclaimed Bax. "it's all nonsense," he added, with an oath. "I never saw nothing and never heard nothing——"

"Then I won't go, Bill. I tell you that I wouldn't move about in the old mill after dark for ten times the money that Tim has gone up to London to get. I know she walks!"

"Take a candle for once, you fool!" growled Bax; and in a menacing manner he clenched a fist that would have felled an ox.

"It's of no use, Bill," she doggedly replied. "I almost think I should be more afraid with a candle than without it. They say she walks with her throat out from ear to ear——"

"Bother take the woman!"—and Bill Bax gave vent to a terrific oath. "Well, then, keep tight hold of this stick, and lean with your back against the door."

"Trust to me," answered his wife; and again she looked significantly towards the lady, as much as to imply that there was no chance of her escaping.

At the same time she took up the club; and her husband, furnishing himself with a couple of large pitchers, issued from the room. He took no light with him; and as soon as he was gone, his wife placed herself with her back against the door, holding the stick in her hand.

The disguised lady had affected to be perfectly indifferent to the preceding colloquy; and while it was in progress she had seemed to be again giving way to her reflections. She suffered about a minute to elapse after Bax had left the room then she rose up, as if suddenly starting from a reverie; and she said in a sort of careless manner, "This must be a wretched dull kind of a life that you lead in this place."

"Well, it's not very lively," answered the woman whose eyes followed her as if she was a cat watching a mouse.

The lady was lounging near the table: she took up the loaf of bread, and all in a moment she let it drop straight down on the top of the candle. Instantaneous darkness ensued. Mrs. Bax gave vent to a cry of mingled rage and terror: and all most at the same time there was a tremendous crashing noise—for the lady upset the table, with all the preparations of supper that were upon it. Mrs. Bax was astounded and bewildered; but she kept her place and furiously brandished the club in the dark, so as to ward off the attack which every moment she expected to be made upon her.

But the lady's policy was altogether of another character. In the twinkling of an eye after she had upset the table, she bounded

to the trap-door and raised it. The rope and pulley that had been used for raising the sacks were suspended over the trap. To let down the coil was the work of an instant; and in another twinkling of an eye down that rope the lady was gliding!

She reached the bottom in safety,—a distance of about forty feet. She had now all her presence of mind about her and she so regulated her proceedings that she did not alight with too much violence on the boards of the ground-floor. But she was in utter darkness; and she knew not which way to turn in order to find the means of egress. Neither had she a moment to lose; for she knew that Bax would be immediately returning—and heaven only could tell to what extremities his rage might drive him when he should discover what had happened. She groped her way; and as good luck would have it, her hand encountered the large wooden latch of a door. It yielded to her touch; and as the door opened, she beheld the glimmering of moonlight upon the water, and the fresh breeze fanned her cheeks. There was the bridge within view, so that she was suddenly struck by the conviction that she was not in the little passage by which she had in the first instance been conducted into the mill.

On she glided: she reached the outer door—and there she beheld Bax stooping down on the bank of the stream, from which he was filling the pitchers. Another instant, and the lady, now rendered desperately intrepid, rushed upon him and hurled him into the water.

Down he plunged; and as he came up to the surface again, the very first object he beheld was a figure gliding across the plank. He was for a moment too much blinded by the water to recognise the person; but as he quickly scrambled up on the bank, he drew his hands rapidly across his eyes, and then perceived the disguised lady hastening across the bridge. A tremendous imprecation burst from his lips; and the next moment he was in full pursuit.

Hastening! no, it was rather flying on the part of the disguised lady! for she had the wing of desperation and terror attached to her feet. Away she flew,—Bax, rushing after her. He called out loudly for her to stop: but the sound of his voice only tended to enhance her speed. She glanced over her shoulder—and saw that he was gaining upon her—on she sped! Another look thrown behind—and now she was distancing him. She knew that she was safe!

A few minutes more; and he was no longer to be seen. Completely out of breath—panting and exhausted—the lady threw herself upon a grassy bank; and there she rested—but still keeping her eyes riveted on the direction whence the ruffian might emerge if he were maintaining the pursuit. However, he appeared not—he had doubtless abandoned the chase as hopeless. When she had recovered her breath, the lady continued her way her heart leaping with joy at this successful result of her daring exploit.

“Now, at least,” she thought to herself, “I am on the safe side! The bankers might to-

morrow suspect something wrong, and might detain Gaffney until he should give proper explanations, or until they had communicated with me. In that case my doom would have been sealed!—for nothing could be more horribly significant than the threat that I should not live to appear as a witness against him!”

The reader will now comprehend that it was from the moment this threat was made, the lady had resolved to run every risk in an endeavour to effect her escape. The thought of the trap-door had flashed to her mind! and she had asked for water to drink as an expedient for getting rid of one of her custodians, in the hope that by some means she would be enabled to outwit the other. Fortune had favoured her, as we have seen—and she was now free.

But she was penniless: her purse and all her jewels had been left behind at the mill. A milestone presently informed her that she was still nine miles from Maidstone. This was a long walk for her to take: but there scarcely seemed to be any help for it. It however appeared as if fortune was determined not to do things by halves on her account on this particular night. She had not advanced half a mile from the spot where she had rested on the bank, when she heard the rumbling of wheels behind her; and in a few minutes she was overtaken by a postchaise returning empty to Maidstone. The postillion, who was somewhat inebriated, did not notice anything peculiar in the well-dress-

individual so as to lead him to suppose that she was one of the gentler sex disguised in male apparel: and he immediately gave her a seat inside the chaise. When the outskirt of Maidstone was reached, the lady desired the postillion to put her down at a little public-house which she named and there the chaise stopped accordingly. The lady's confidential maid was waiting there; and she had a supply of money in her purse. All difficulties were therefore at once overcome, the postillion was remunerated—the male disguise was soon exchanged for the raiment properly becoming the lady's sex—a postchaise was soon in readiness—and away started the heroine of the evening's adventures, attended by her confidential maid.

Precisely at ten o'clock on the ensuing morning, Mr. Timothy Gaffney entered the celebrated banking house in the Strand. His friend Mr. John Peppercorn, who was dressed in a sort of sporting style, and had the air of a horse chaunter, lounged on the opposite side of the street pretending to be looking in a picture-shop window, but in reality awaiting with no inconsiderable degree of interest the issue of his companion's call at the bank. Tim advanced with an air of confidence up to the counter and presented the letter. Indeed that confidence was not assumed, for he considered the chances a hundred to one in his favour.

"You must take this letter into the parlour," said the clerk, to whom he presented it. "It is private and addressed to the Firm."

To the parlour Tim Gaffney accordingly proceeded; and he found himself in the presence of a short, elderly, bald-headed gentleman, who was seated at a table strewn with letters and other documents.

"What have you there?" inquired this gentleman.

Tim gave the letter: the old gentleman took it—carefully examined the seal—and having assured himself that it had not been broken nor tampered with, he muttered "Then her secret is safe!"

Without opening the letter he proceeded very deliberately to lock it up in an iron safe, the key of which he consigned to his pocket.

"That will do, my good man," he calmly said, as he resumed his seat.

"Do?" ejaculated Gaffney. "But you have not read the letter, sir!"

"I know its contents well enough," was the reply, delivered in the same quiet tone as before.

For a moment Tim Gaffney knew not whether he stood upon his head or his heels; but quickly recovering himself, he said, "I suppose, sir, you are not the gentleman who reads private letters of that sort, and I must call again?"

"Oh, yes! I am the gentleman—as you might judge when I told you that I already knew the contents of the letter. Or else of course I should have opened and read it."

"But there must be a mistake, sir," continued Tim.

"There is no mistake, my good man—unless it be made by yourself."

"Beg your pardon, sir," persisted Tim; "but it is impossible that you can know the contents of that letter!"

"To prove to you the contrary," rejoined the elderly gentleman, who was very serious, but very mild in his voice and look, "I need only mention that the letter enjoins me not to ask you any questions."

Tim Gaffney was thunder-struck; he literally staggered against the door-post: but quickly recovering himself, he said, "I wish you a very good morning, sir:—and he took his departure.

"Well?" said Jack Peppercorn, as he rejoined his friend in the street. "I see there's something wrong, old feller, by your looks?"

"Wrong?" echoed Tim, savagely, "I'm done as brown as ever I was in all my life! But how the deuce it could have happened, I can't for the life of me conceive!"

CHAPTER X.

A DISCOVERY.

WE must now return to Alfred Trevor, whom we left when he parted from the disguised lady, and whom we represented as endeavouring to compose his looks prior to rejoining his beloved Ethel at the cottage. But in spite of all his attempts to assume a mien which should have the effect of alarming Ethel as little as possible, it was more than human nature could achieve to avoid the betrayal of some portion of the agitation which

shook him.

The young lady herself was waiting in the garden for his return: she was a prey to the utmost suspense; for visions of a duel—wounds—and perhaps death—were flitting through her mind. The minutes seemed to be ages dragging themselves past! At length Trevor emerged from the surrounding obscurity: and Ethel flew towards him.

"It is all settled, dearest!" he said. "You have nothing more to apprehend on my account!"

Though the dusk was closing in, yet there was sufficient light to show Ethel her husband's countenance; and she saw that it was deadly pale. She noticed moreover that he was all trembling; and the immensity of the love she bore for him had taught her so minutely to study his disposition and character, that the slightest evidence of any unusual feeling on his part was sure to be comprehended by her.

"Oh, Alfred!" she exclaimed, "I am afraid that there has been a scene of violence—or else that the worst is yet to happen, and you in your kindness are concealing it from me?"

"Believe me Ethel—believe me, dearest! when I give you the solemn assurance that there will be no duel! No! I swear to you that there will not!"

Again were the beautiful arms wound about Trevor's neck; and Ethel exclaimed in a tone that was gushing with joy, "Oh, I believe you, Alfred!—and heaven be thanked that there is to be no serious issue to the case!" But then as she again saw how agitated he was, a sudden revulsion in her feelings took place; and she said in a lower and

more deliberate tone, "Tell me why you still seem unhappy—troubled—distressed——"

"Oh, Ethel dearest!" he cried, "is it possible that I could know how you have been insulted without experiencing a mingled indignation and grief? Would that I could be always with you to protect you, my Ethel!"

"Think no more of it, Alfred!" she exclaimed imploringly. "It is the first time such a thing has ever happened; and let us hope it will be the last. Besides, you are with me now; and while you are present I am always happy, and think of naught beside!"

"But I must leave you again to-morrow, Ethel—I must leave you to-morrow!"

"To-morrow. Alfred? Oh, I thought you told me you had come back for several days?"

"I had forgotten—or else you must have misunderstood me. But I will be with you again the day after to-morrow, and then I promise you I will make a long stay at the cottage?"

"With this assurance I must content myself," answered the loving creature. "But do tell me once more—just once more, as a last assurance—that you are not going away to-morrow on account of anything connected with the unpleasant occurrence of this evening?"

"I repeat dearest Ethel," emphatically responded Trevor,—"I repeat the solemn assurance that there is to be no duel—nothing hostile of any kind! By the love I bear you, I swear that this is the truth! I will just walk up as far as the Red Lion, to order my horse to come and fetch me at nine o'clock to-morrow morning, as I cannot

wait for the coach, because I wish to be in London early; and in that case I shall be all the more certain to be enabled to return to you the day after to-morrow."

Trevor imprinted a kiss upon Ethel's cheek, and then again quitted the garden. She remained walking there alone; but in a few moments she beheld some one stop at the gate, without however entering the premises. A second glance showed Ethel that it was the parish clerk, Mr. Hogben. She at once accosted the old man, and wished him "Good evening."

"Good evening, ma'am," he said. "The flowers in your gardening smells so nice that that I couldn't help stopping to scent 'em!"

"You are quite welcome to walk in," exclaimed the amiable Ethel, "and pick as many flowers as you like. It is early for them as yet: but still there are some very pretty ones."

"Thank'ee kindly, ma'am," rejoined the clerk: "but my eyes is getting old, and I can't see the flowers well by this light. Ah! by the bye, ma'am did you observe that very nicely-dressed young gentleman, with the mustashes? You met him, you know, as you was taking your walk this evening——"

"I saw the person you allude to," answered Ethel, in a tone which immediately grew constrained.

"Well now, I dessay you didn't like the look of him," ejaculated the old man, "cause why, he wore a quizzing-glass and looked like a fop. But I could tell you summut which would make you laugh rather

than think so serious of it. However, I mustn't do that I suppose,"—and yet Mr. Hogben was burning with a desire to throw off the statement from the tip of his tongue. "Ah! what a many questions he did ask me about Mr. Trevor and you!"

"About us?" ejaculated Ethel, in astonishment. "Surely you must be making a mistake; for his conduct towards me was of a rudeness——"

"Questions!" ejaculated the old man. "I should rather think he did put a power of questions! He seemed to take a great interest in you——"

"Enough on this point," interrupted Ethel, with a certain degree of severity in her tone. "Did you not hear me say that he treated me with rudeness?"

The old man laughed outright; but it was in a very good-humoured way, so that Ethel was more bewildered than offended. She could not possibly conceive what was passing in Mr. Hogben's mind to make him thus merry on such a subject.

"Well, I must tell you the secret," he said, "although I oughtn't to do it. But then I dessay she will never come into these parts again——"

"She?" ejaculated Ethel. "What mean you?"

"I mean just what I say, ma'am," replied the old clerk, with another outburst of merriment; it was no young spark at all! It was lady dressed up!"

"A lady?" echoed Ethel; and her astonishment was immense.

"Yes ma'am—there's no mistake about it," pursued Mr. Hogben. "But did you ever see any one so neatly get up?"

Suppose it was a play-actress dressing for the stage, the thing couldn't been better done? But she was no play-actress I'll be bound. She was as regular a lady as you yourself are ma'am. And pretty too. Why she must be beautiful without them whiskers and mustashes! But what on earth she could have come into this neighbourhood for unless it was to make inquiries about Mr. Trevor and yourself I raly can't tell!"

At this moment a voice exclaimed, "Well, if that isn't Uncle Hogben speaking, I never was more mistaken in my life!"

"Why, Sam?" cried the old man; "is it raly you? My nevvvy, ma'am, he added for the behoof of Mrs. Trevor.

The new arrival was a young man of about one-and-twenty, and dressed in a plain genteel suit of black, so that he had the air of a gentleman's valet. He was good-looking and well made; and on perceiving a lady standing at the gate, he made her a most respectful bow.

"I've got a week's holiday, uncle," he said, "and I came down to father's at the Wells this morning; so I thought that this evening I would walk across and see you; for I knew you'd give me a bed——"

"Aye—and a hearty welcome, Sam," exclaimed the old man; "for you are a good lad, and don't spend your wages in fooleries and gallivantings about London. He's been upwards of two year, ma'am," continued Mr. Hogben, again addressing himself to Ethel, "in the service of a great rich nobleman in London——"

"The Earl of Carshalton," interjected Samuel. "He married the celebrated tragic actress Miss Percy. Perhaps you may have heard of her, ma'am? He has only lately come into the title of Carshalton. He is a good kind master—and as for the Countess, God bless her! everybody speaks well of her!"

"I am glad," said Ethel, "that you are in so good a situation."

She then moved away from the gate; but old Mr. Hogben still lingered there—for he seemed very proud of his nephew Samuel, and it was with infinite delight he heard the young man talk of the great people in whose service he was.

"By the bye, uncle, has Dr. Pickstock got any person of rank staying with him? for I don't know where else he could be stopping—unless he may have walked or rode in from some nobleman's or gentleman's country-seat——"

"Who are you talking about, Sam?" inquired the old man. "The wicar hasn't got no one staying with him."

"All I can tell you, uncle, is that at this present moment there is a Duke in the village."

"A Dook?" ejaculated Mr. Hogben, in a species of awful astonishment.

"Yes—a Duke," responded the nephew. "Lord bless you, uncle! to one who has lived in London Dukes don't seem to be such very rare things——"

"And you mean to tell me Sam," interrupted the parish clerk, "that there is a rare living Dook in our willage at this moment?—a Duke of flesh and blood—and he walking about on his two legs like any other per-

son? Or has the vax-vorks come and it's a Dook which travels in a carawan?"

"No, uncle," pursued the nephew: "It is a real living Duke—and you may see him with your own eyes if you like."

"Well, I never did yet see a Dook to my knowledge," said the parish clerk. "I once saw a whale at Ramsgate, and a boaconstructor in a travelling wan; but among other cur'osities I never did see a Dook. See come along. Sam!—But are you quite certain?" and Mr. Hogben stopped short, after having got three or four paces away from the gate.

"Certain, uncle? Of course I am," exclaimed the nephew. "The Duke is an intimate friend of my master's; he and the Duchess are often at Carshalton House. Ah! you should see the Duchess, uncle! They call her the Brilliant Duchess. She is a splendid creature—with such a profile!—a clear complexion—light brown hair—large blue eyes——"

Ethel heard no more; for the parish clerk and his nephew had now passed beyond earshot. She could not help listening to the preceding colloquy as far as it went, for there was something amusing in the observations made by the old parish clerk; and a smile lingered on Ethel's lips as she resumed her walk to and fro in the garden, until Trevor made his appearance. They entered the elegantly-furnished little parlour; and Trevor, who was now more composed than when he had set out on his walk to the Red Lion, began to converse in a cheerful tone, as he and Ethel sat at the

window, which was wide open, with an array of beautiful flowers upon the sill.

"I just now heard such an extraordinary statement from the old parish clerk!" said Ethel, from whose mind the laughable discourse about the Duke had hitherto banished the intelligence respecting the disguised lady.

"Ah!" ejaculated Trevor, with a sudden start. "What—what—"

"Ah, now I am completely reassured with respect to the young fashionable!" continued Ethel. But perhaps you made the discovery—perhaps you knew—"

"What? what?" inquired Trevor. "Do tell me, dear Ethel!"

"It was a lady dressed up," she responded; "and Mr. Hogben has been telling me that the disguised female made so many different inquiries relative to you and me!—But hush!" and Ethel laid her fair hand upon Trevor's arm; for at that instant they caught the sounds of voices speaking in the road outside the palings which fenced the front part of the garden. "Hush, dear Alfred!" whispered Ethel; "It is old Mr. Hogben again—and he has got his nephew with him—and I have been so amused by their discourse!"

"Let us shut the window. Ethel!" ejaculated Trevor, somewhat impatiently.

"What! this beautiful evening?" she gently whispered. "I thought you liked the fresh air—and the brilliant moonlight—and the fragrance of the flowers—"

"So I do, Ethel:" and Trevor who had started up to close the casement, resumed his seat by Ethel's side, so that the window

still remained open.

"I tell you, uncle, I could take my oath of it!" one of the voices in the road was now heard to say.

"That's the nephew speaking!" whispered Ethel. "Now you will hear what the old man has to say—But Ah! they are coming into the garden!"

"What on earth can they want?" exclaimed Trevor, who by a variety of circumstances was now goaded into a positive rage, for he had suddenly learnt to look upon the old parish clerk as a mischief-maker and tale-bearer whom he alike hated and dreaded.

He was rushing towards the door, when Ethel caught him by the arm, saying, "Pray do not be angry with the poor old man, Alfred! He is very harmless and good-natured! I just now gave him leave to walk in the garden to look at the flowers, or to pick some if he liked—"

"Yes—but one does not pick flowers at moonlight!" ejaculated Trevor impatiently. "However, I will not interfere with those persons—"

"No, no! they will do no harm!" said Ethel quickly. "Come back to your seat at the window."

Trevor accordingly suffered the amiable creature to lead him towards the open casement. Then there was a hasty whispering of voices in the garden but not another syllable could now be caught of what was passing between Mr. Hogben and his nephew; and almost immediately afterwards the sounds of their retreating footsteps were heard, followed by the closing of the garden-gate.

"I really should have been

sorry," resumed Ethel, "if you had spoken harshly to the old man. He is simplicity itself! Just now his nephew was telling him that he had seen a Duke in the village—and the old man was so anxious to see and have a peep at the great personage and so they went away for the purpose—It was while you had gone up to the Red Loin to speak about your horse for to-morrow morning—"

"Ethel," said Trevor, suddenly starting from his seat I do not feel well this evening. I don't know what it is—the atmosphere seems oppressive—I think there will be a storm—"

"Oh, no," exclaimed the young lady; "there is an agreeable freshness in the air. Oh! you must indeed be unwell, dear Alfred, if you have these sensations! Will you retire to rest?"

"No—I think I shall mount my horse—"

"What! at this hour?" ejaculated Ethel.

"Perhaps it would do me good. But no! I am better now! So down, dearest. You are very, very fond of me—are you not, dear Ethel?"

"Ah, you know it! you know it!" she exclaimed enthusiastically; and she pressed his head to her bosom. "I have no thought on earth but for you and our dear child!"

"Dearest, dearest Ethel!"—and Trevor strained her to his heart.

When they retired to rest, Trevor's sleep was troubled and uneasy; and Ethel, who was anxious on his account, and fancied that he was not very well, lay awake to watch if there were aught she could do for him. A light burnt in the chamber: she bent over

him—she contemplated his countenance—and she saw that his features were ever and anon convulsed as if they were reflecting the most troubled thoughts, or as if he were under the influence of a painful dream. Several times she was on the point of awaking him, when he turned, and then for an interval he slept more easily—until he gradually began to grow agitated again. The perspiration stood thick upon his forehead: Ethel wiped it away—she pressed her lips to that brow—and she let him slumber on, for she thought it a pity to disturb him. At length he slept tranquilly; and when the affectionate young lady became positively assured that he was no longer agitated, she resigned herself to repose.

When they awoke in the morning, Ethel said naught in respect to the troubled night which Trevor had passed; for as he made no complaint, she thought it was not worth while to allude to the circumstance. He partook of a hasty breakfast: he affectionately embraced Ethel and the child—and mounting his horse, which was ready at the door, he rode away.

About an hour after his departure, a short, stout gentleman, of unmistakable clerical appearance in respect to his apparel—with a very red face, and a self-sufficient important air—entered the garden of Dahlia Cottage.

"Good morning, madam," he said, in a cold and constrained tone to Ethel, whom he beheld seated at the window of the little parlour.

"Ah, Dr. Pickstock?" ejaculated the good-tempered young lady, in a tone that implied a

cordial welcome. "Pray walk in and be seated. Did you happen to wish to see Mr. Trevor?"

"Well, madam," replied the clergyman, as he took the seat that was offered him, "I did wish to see the—the person who——"

"You mean my husband?" said Ethel, surprised by the singularity of the vicar's look and manner, which she could no longer fail to notice. "He left at about nine o'clock; but he will return to-morrow. Is there any particular business——"

"Madam," interrupted Dr. Pickstock, who now thought it fit to assume the most awful air of indignation, "I had better perhaps come to the point at once, and tell you that everything is discovered."

Ethel looked confounded;—and indeed she was so amazed and bewildered by such an ominous declaration that she was utterly unable to give utterance to a word.

"Yes, madam—I repeat, everything is discovered; and I cannot help feeling that I have been made a dupe in a very unhand-some manner. Nevertheless, I have no desire to create a scandal and an exposure——"

"Good heavens!" cried Ethel, now suddenly recovering the faculty of speech: "what on earth do you mean?"

"It is useless for you to affect excitement or ignorance," rejoined the reverend gentleman. "You have been a party to a fraud—I may even call it forgery—for such indeed it must have been——"

"Dr. Pickstock!" exclaimed Ethel, starting up with indignation from her seat.

"Come, come," he said; "these

airs will not do with me. You must have supposed that the truth would be sooner or later discovered—and you cannot therefore have been altogether unprepared for it. The forgery of such a certificate is a very serious offence; and his Grace, being a legislator, ought to know it."

"Good heavens! what do you mean?" exclaimed Ethel, a vague terror seizing upon her.

"What! do I not speak sufficiently plain?" said Dr. Pickstock, now irritated at what he considered to be the obstinate persistence of the young lady in a course of hypocrisy and duplicity: "or do you wish me to tell you outright that it is no longer a secret in the village that you are the mistress of the Duke of Ardleigh?"

For a few moments Ethel stood like one who was suddenly smitten with idiocy: she stared vacantly upon the clergyman as if she were still at a loss to comprehend the full meaning of his words. But all in an instant a light flamed up in her brain—a thousand circumstances swept like a hurricane through her memory—she saw it all in a moment—and with a hollow groan she sank down upon the carpet.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DUKE AND DUCHESS.

THE young Duke of Ardleigh had succeeded to the title in the year 1844: that is to say, about three years previous to the date whereof we are writing. His

mother, the Dowager-Duchess, was still alive; but she had lost the use of her intellects in consequence of an injury she had sustained by the upsetting of her carriage some four or five years previous to the time of which we are now speaking. She resided altogether at Thornbury Park, under the immediate care of a female keeper; but the young Duchess, who had ever shown the most affectionate sympathy towards her afflicted mother-in-law, passed no inconsiderable portion of her time at Thornbury in order that she might bestow her attentions where they were so much needed. The young Duke had several brothers and sisters; and they likewise dwelt for the most part at Thornbury, under the care of a tutor and governess. We may as well here add that there was no issue from the marriage of the young Duke and Duchess.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, and the young Duchess was reclining upon a sofa in her elegantly furnished boudoir. She was still in a morning *deshabillee*; and though looking eminently beautiful, as usual, she had a certain air of fatigue, as if she had not passed much of the preceding night in her couch.

The door of the boudoir opened; and her Grace's principal maid—a handsome, genteel-looking woman, whose age approached thirty—made her appearance. She bore a silver salver, on which rested a sealed packet; and this she presented to the Duchess.

"Ah! it is from the banker's!" said the brilliant lady, with a significant smile bent with pat-

ronizing familiarity upon her confidential maid: then opening the packet, she examined its contents.

The confidential maid waited with visible curiosity and suspense for farther intelligence from the lips of her mistress; and the Duchess all of a sudden burst out into a laugh—not loud, but nevertheless unmistakably genuine in the merriment of its silvery tones.

"Only think, Lavinia!" she exclaimed; he presented himself at the bank as soon as the doors opened this morning——"

"Indeed, my lady!" said the confidential maid,— "but only to find himself outwitted?"

"Precisely so. Here is a note from the managing partner, who tells me what took place; and he has sent me back the note which I penned at the mill. Ah! it is an adventure which I shall never forget as long as I live! To think that I should have after all succeeded in out-witting so very cunning a person as Mr. Timothy Gaffney! How foolish he must have looked when the banker gave him to understand that the order was not to be cashed! It seems that he at first thought there was a mistake; but when he could no longer conceal from himself that by some means or another he was baffled, he lost no time in beating a retreat from the banker's private parlour."

"I am afraid that the man will owe your Grace a serious grudge," said Lavinia; and he is doubtless a very dangerous character. I should not at all wonder if he keeps vehicles for hire at Maidstone, merely that he may have the opportunity of

robbing and murdering travellers whom he undertakes to drive; and perhaps the old mill has proved the scene of many a fearful crime."

"Very likely," said the Duchess; "but it proved the scene of a glorious triumph on my part." Then, after a pause, the patrician lady added, "Go and see, Lavinia, if his Grace has arrived; for if so, he may wish to speak to me."

The maid quitted the boudoir; and the Duchess thought to herself, "I have no doubt that Lavinia is dying with anxiety to learn why I undertook that secret expedition into Kent, and why on arriving at Maidstone I dressed myself in male toilet, and leaving her behind set out for Addington. Does she take it to be an idle freak? or does she think that I was engaged in some love-intrigue? Ah! she must fancy what she will: but she shall not know the truth from my lips. Besides, she is all discretion; and so long as she is well paid, she only uses her eyes, her ears, and her lips, according to my bidding."

In a few minutes Lavinia returned to the boudoir, with the intimation that the Duke had just arrived at Ardeleigh House and would be with her Grace in a few minutes.

"You can withdraw, Lavinia," said the Duchess, with an air of seeming carelessness.

The confidential maid retired; and in about five minutes the Duke of Ardeleigh entered the boudoir. He endeavoured to compose his features as much as possible: but there was a certain under-current, so to speak, of distress and suspense which

failed not to be fathomed by the scrutinizing regard which his wife bent upon him.

"I promised to be with you to-day, Mary," he said, taking a seat upon a chair near the sofa on which she was half-reclining; "and I have kept my word. I can scarcely venture to ask upon what terms we are to meet, because after the discovery which you made last evening I feel, as I then said, that I am utterly in your power, and must yield to whatsoever you may choose to dictate. At the same time——"

He stopped short: the Duchess waited for upwards of a minute to allow him an opportunity to continue; and then she coldly asked, "What were you about to observe?"

"You said something last evening," continued the Duke, "in reference to a paper which you wished me to sign. Of course, whatever its nature may be, I must submit. But I hope to God that you meditate no step which may possibly lead to an exposure before the world! It would do you no good—while on the other hand it would brand the noble name of Ardeleigh with infamy: and my brothers and sisters who are growing up, would have to blush for me. And then too, Mary, you will remember the peculiar circumstances under which I married you. You were a mother—you had a child by another when I led you to the altar—and this is the first time that I have ever alluded to the fact during the four years that we have now been united!"

"You have been generous, Herbert," replied the Duchess; "and therefore you may at once

set your mind at rest—for I intend to be equally generous towards you. And yet I tremble on your behalf—for it is evident that you have perpetrated a tremendous fraud towards the unfortunate creature——”

“Yes, yes—I have!” ejaculated the young Duke: “but now that I am reassured in respect to the mode in which you regard the discovery you have made, I will take care to prevent exposure in other quarters.—Answer me one word. Do you intend to stipulate that I shall see Ethel no more?”

“You love her very much, Herbert?” inquired the Duchess.

“Mary, you may conceive how much I love her when in order to possess her I ran the fearful risk of all the consequences attendant upon bigamy! I was maddened and infatuated, I was not the master of my own actions—would have sold my soul to Satan sooner than have resigned that beautiful girl! Ah! but perhaps you are offended that I speak thus enthusiastically on a subject which is of course so painful to your own feelings?”

“Speak candidly,” said the Duchess. “Proceed—tell me all that is floating in your thoughts. Our marriage was inauspicious, Herbert: it was solemnized in the midst of a delusion. You believed that you loved me with a lasting fervour—whereas it was but a transient passion which you experienced for me. And then, perhaps, the idea was incessantly present in your mind that I had borne a child to another——”

“Yes, Mary,” interrupted Herbert; “I did think of all

this!—aye, I thought of it incessantly! Yet I never once breathed a reproach in your ear—and I exerted preterhuman efforts to conceal what was passing in my own mind. I could not be openly and flagrantly unjust towards you! I married you knowing all the circumstances of your previous career, and how you had become the victim of the villain Edwin St. Clair. And yet I did not less poignantly feel that I had made an immense mistake in supposing that I loved you with that enduring affection which justified me in making you my wife. I will confess the truth—I was even afraid that I should learn to hate you: and I constantly strove to fix my thoughts upon the good traits of your character—upon your kindness towards my afflicted mother as well as towards my brothers and sisters——”

“But still, Herbert,” interjected the Duchess, “you could not forget those past circumstances to which you have alluded?—you could not shut out from your recollection that I had been an actress upon the stage, and that I had become the victim of an unprincipled ravisher?”

“This is true, Mary! this is true!” said Herbert, with a groan; “and it was almost in a state of mind bordering on desperation that I set off with the intention of making a pedestrian tour through some of the most picturesque counties of England. It was under a strict *incognito* that I entered upon my design: and first of all I proceeded into Dorsetshire. I went not elsewhere—you now know how it was that the little village of

Southdale in that county became the centre of all possible attractions for me——”

“Who was this Ethel whom you love so fondly?” inquired the Duchess, in a low tone.

“Her father was an officer in the East India Company’s service but she does not recollect him—he died in her infancy, leaving a very modest competency for his widow and his child. Ethel’s mother was a good and prudent woman—and she gave her daughter an excellent education. She died a short time before I became acquainted with Ethel; and thus it was as an orphan—in mourning—living by herself in a picturesque cottage—without a relation in the world, though with every one in that village ready to come forward and succour her at the slightest intimation that she stood in need of a friend,—yes, it was thus that two years ago we met and—— But shall I go on with this narrative?”

“Yes—proceed,” said the Duchess. “Now that I know so much, I had better know all!”

“I loved her at first sight—and, Oh! pardon me, Mary, for adding that I *then* comprehended what true love was! It was a perfect dream in which I was at first steeped. At length I was awakened from that Elysian reverie by a well-meant yet delicately-put query from the lips of Mr. Milner, the worthy old clergyman of Southdale. He asked me what were my intentions towards the beautiful orphan in whom every one felt so deeply interested?—Mary, I feel that this must be a strange story for *me*, the husband, to tell unto *you*, the wife——”

“Proceed, Herbert—proceed,” said the young Duchess, with a look that was completely composed, and in a voice which was mildly severe, without the slightest accent of menace in it, and even with a faint tincture of compassionate sympathy.

“As I have said,” pursued the Duke, “I was suddenly startled from a dream. How was I to act” I will tell you frankly that I thought of making Ethel my mistress, I marshalled a thousand reasons to tranquillize the scruples of my conscience when deliberately making up my mind to become her seducer. But I was deceived; and I discovered the most perfect innocence may prove a woman’s strongest defence. It was so in that case. The devoted love which Ethel bore for me was not a weakness which might lead to her fall—but it was a virtue in all its sublimest chastity and grandest strength. Oh, pity me, Mary! pity me! My God! how I loved her. And therefore I married her—or rather I should say, I passed with her through a ceremony which after all was only the mockery of a marriage! nay, more a crime and an outrage—a dark damnable villany on my part!”

The Duke of Ardleigh rested his elbows upon his knees buried his face in his hands and wept and sobbed like a child. The Duchess—naturally good-hearted, though her feelings and her principles had been by circumstances much strained and warped from even a period antecedent to her marriage—could not help experiencing a deep compassion for her husband.

“I do not mean to separate you from your Ethel,” she said.

"You love her devotedly—and you must not abandon her."

"Ah, Mary! this is indeed most generous on your part!" and the Duke made a motion as if he were on the very point of throwing himself at his wife's feet.

"No, no, Herbert!" she hastened to interpose; "do not give me credit for too much genuine sincerity and magnanimity in the present instance! My conduct is swayed only by selfish considerations. In a word, if you are to do precisely what you like in the world, you must not wonder if I expect——"

"Ah!"—and the Duke started: but instantaneously recovering himself, he said meekly, "Yes, I am in your power; and I the false unfaithful husband, have no right to hope or demand that you shall continue the constant and faithful wife! From this moment forth, therefore, I renounce all control over your actions. Nay, more—I even thank you for leaving me at liberty to enjoy the society of her towards whom I need not deem myself quite a villain so long as of my own accord I do not neglect or abandon her!"

"We seem to be pretty well agreed," said the Duchess, "in respect to our future arrangements. All that I require from you Herbert, is a letter or document of some kind which will prevent you from suddenly turning round upon me in case it should please me to indulge in any little fantasy not exactly compatible with the duties of a wife."

"Good heavens, Mary!" ejaculated the Duke, with a mingled horror and disgust expressed up-

on his countenance; "how coolly and deliberately you allude to the subject, as if you had already erred, or else had a lover ready to receive you in his arms!"

"You have given me all the details of your bigamous connection," replied the Duchess; "and it is not now for *you* to play the part of a maudlin sentimentalist."

The Duke coloured to the very hair of his head; and he looked profoundly humiliated. The Duchess was perfectly composed.

"At all events, Mary," her husband presently said, "Let the compact between us—infamous as it is—rest upon our mutual honour: but submit me, not to the degradation of signing with my own hands a document, which if it came before the world, would brand us with everlasting shame."

"I will take care of the document," said the Duchess, firmly but resolutely. "It shall be your fault if it ever come to the knowledge of the world."

"Good heavens! am I not already sufficiently in your power?" exclaimed the Duke. "Could you not at the very first indication of hostility on my part—could you not, I ask, turn round upon me and proclaim this bigamous connection to which you have so emphatically alluded?"

"Ethel may die, and then my hold over you would cease," answered the Duchess; "whereas on the other hand the first false step that I take, leaves me everlastingly in your power. It is for this reason that I demand the document."

The Duke made a sign of ineffable disgust; but he was

about to seat himself at a table where there were writing materials, when Lavinia entered the room, bearing a letter which she presented to his Grace. He instantly recognised the handwriting: he started as if a serpent had stung him—a deadly pallor overspread his countenance—and he reeled towards a seat. Lavinia meanwhile had retired: or else she would have marvelled how a mere glimpse of the superscription of that letter could have produced upon her ducal master an effect as terrible as if it were his death-warrant which had met his view.

"You apprehend something?" said the Duchess, whose curiosity was much piqued.

"It is from Ethel," he answered, in a hollow voice, "She evidently knows all—for this letter is addressed to the Duke of Ardleigh!"

With trembling hands he opened it; and a paper fell upon the carpet. He picked it up: it was the marriage certificate signed by the Rev. Mr. Milner of Southdale. The contents of the letter ran as follows:—

"The thunderstorm which for some hours had seemed to be collecting above my head, has at length burst. It would have proved overwhelming were it not that God left me strength sufficient to bear up against it for my poor child's sake. Not a syllable of reproach will I address to you: but we must never meet again. It was my pride and happiness to be yours so long as methought I was yours in all honour: but it would be degradation and misery to continue yours in dishonour. As I do not reproach you, do not reproach yourself!

Nay, more—I can forgive you because I know that you love me. Yes—you must have loved me or you would not have incurred the tremendous risk which you have encountered. I enclose you this certificate in order that you yourself may destroy a document the existence of which places you in so much peril.

"That you may be made aware of the precise extent to which the stupendous secret is known, and that you may labour under no unnecessary suspense on the point, I give you the ensuing information:—It appears that when Mr. Hogben and his nephew came back again to the garden last evening, it was that the latter might obtain another view of you and fully identify you to his uncle. The moonbeams played upon your countenance as you returned to the casement; and it was sufficient. The clerk mentioned the discovery to his Vicar, Dr. Pickstock, who called upon me. Between those three persons—the vicar, the clerk, and the nephew—the secret rests.

"I have now no difficulty in conjecturing who the disguised lady was. With her splendid figure—with her handsome profile, her clear complexion, her light brown hair, and her large blue eyes—who could that be but the brilliant Duchess? I entreat you to give such explanations as may convince her Grace that I did not willingly and wilfully offend against her. Let her be disarmed, if possible of angry feelings toward me; and Oh! may she forgive you as sincerely as I have already bestowed upon you my own pardon!

"You will hear from me again

a few days, when I hope to be enabled to give you one more proof of the disinterested love that I have borne you!—yes, one last proof—and then farewell forever! I beseech you to remain at Ardleigh House until you receive the promised communication from me."

There was no signature—and the letter was dated from no place; so that the half-distracted Herbert could not even tell whether it was written at Addington or in London, or elsewhere. All the first part of the writing was firm and steady: but the latter portion was tremulous—and there were evidences that tears had been dropped upon the paper. Oh! the young Duke full well comprehended that these must have been scalding tears of anguish; and in the frightful vividness of his fevered fancy they now seemed to be falling like drops of boiling oil on his own brain and of molten lead on his own heart!

"My God!" he despairingly moaned; I am righteously punished! Look, Mary, look! Could you wish your most bitter enemy to endure excruciations more horrible than poor Ethel must have felt when penning these lines or tortures more poignant than I have felt while reading them?"

The Duchess took the letter, and hastily ran her eyes over its contents—while her husband paced to and fro in the apartment like one who was about to go mad.

"I must fly to her! I must fly to her!" he suddenly ejaculated: and he bounded towards the door.

"Be not insensate, Herbert,"

cried the Duchess, springing from the sofa and holding him back. "You cannot expect her to be any longer at Danlia Cottage—and you assuredly do not hope to fall in with her in the very first street of this metropolis along which you may frantically fly?"

"True!" he ejaculated: and then wringing his hands in despair, he cried, "Ethel, Ethel! and my darling Alfred! Oh! shall I never see ye more?"

"I can tell you where to find them," said the duchess coldly and confidently.

"You?" cried her husband, with a look of mingled amazement and joy.

"Yes!" responded the Duchess.

"Then tell me—tell me—Oh! tell me, I beseech you!"

"Give me the document," she said, pointing to the writing materials that were upon the table.

The Duke sat down, and hastily penned a few lines upon a sheet of paper.

"There! will that do?" he demanded with feverish impatience.

"There! will that do?" said the Duchess. "Here, take your Ethel's letter and the certificate."

"And now for heaven's sake tell me where I shall find Ethel and my boy?" demanded Herbert, thrusting into his pocket the papers which his wife had just handed him "Oh, tell me where I shall find them!"

"At Southdale, to be sure," rejoined the Duchess.

The Duke flung a look of earnest inquiry upon her for a moment; and then, as a light suddenly flashed in unto his mind, he ejaculated, "Yes, yes! it must be so!" and he darted

from the room.

Almost immediately afterwards Lavinia entered, saying, "If you please, my lady, a Miss Hartland wishes to speak to your Grace."

"I will receive her here," responded the Duchess with that air of seeming carelessness and languid indifference which she was wont to adopt when labouring to conceal a sudden paroxysm of emotion.

Imogen was apparelled with that mingled plainness and neatness which we have on a former occasion associated with her walking-dress; and her countenance was concealed by a veil. When she was conducted into the boudoir she waited until the maid had retired ere she raised her veil; and then it was with a frank easy courtesy that she saluted the Duchess—at the same time saying "It is precisely twelve days since your Grace was at my humble abode; and you promised to communicate with me."

"Sit down Miss Hartland" said the Duchess. "You bade me use my own discretion and leisure—and therefore I was not in any haste——"

"Oh! I should have thought," exclaimed Imogen reproachfully "that long, long ere this you would have been in haste to embrace your own offspring!"

"Hush, Miss Hartland! hush! The very walls have ears!" interjected the Duchess, with affright depicted on her features.

"I will not speak to your Grace another syllable here on the subject, unless you give me permission," answered Imogen, in a low tone. "On the contrary, perhaps it would be much better

that the conversation should take place elsewhere——"

"Yes—for heaven's sake let it be so!" cried the Duchess, but likewise in a subdued voice. "I am terrified to death—surrounded by domestics as I am—And then, too, if any one should recognise you—Not that I mean to give you any offence—for I do not forget that I myself was once upon the stage"—yet a quick flush crossed her Grace's features as she alluded to the fact: "but it would seem so strange that you should call upon me——"

"I am not ill-natured," said Imogen quietly, "and I would not wilfully do anything that shall compromise your Grace; but there are reasons why I wish to be honoured with a little conversation on a certain subject."

The Duchess opened a writing desk, and thence drew forth a number of bank-notes: but Miss Hartland shook her head impatiently, and said, "No! My motives are not pecuniary ones. I told your Grace the other day that I am not selfish nor covetous. Name the time when you will again honour me with your presence at my abode—and I shall be satisfied."

The Duchess reflected for a few moments: and then she said "If I come to you the day after to-morrow in the evening, will you be at leisure to receive me?"

"The day after to-morrow in the evening, I shall expect your Grace," rejoined Imogen: and again drawing down her veil, she took her leave of the Duchess.

CHAPTER XII.

SOUTHDALE.

GREAT was the sensation which was excited in the picturesque little village of Southdale, when it was rumoured that the beautiful Mrs. Trevor, who had gone away a bride from the place nearly two years back, had suddenly returned to pay, as it seemed, a flying visit to a spot which was supposed to be endeared to her by so many associations. There she had passed the greater portion of her existence: there she had first fallen in with him whom she had accompanied to the altar: her father and mother lay entombed in the church. For all these reasons therefore, it was considered natural enough that she should find an opportunity to revisit, if only for a few hours, the village of Southdale.

Mrs. Trevor arrived in a post-chaise; and she alighted at the only inn the village could boast of. She was attended by the nursemaid, who carried her infant boy. The landlord and landlady of the little hostelry who had known Ethel from her childhood were delighted to see her; and they lost not a moment in putting the kindest inquiries in reference to Mr. Trevor. Ethel possessed the most perfect control over her feelings; for there are certain circumstances in which the most delicate natures are enabled to arm themselves with a panoply which but a short time back they might have fancied that they were but little able to bear. She replied with a smiling countenance to all the questions that were thus put to her: she

gave her querists to understand that Mr. Trevor was perfectly well, but that press of business had prevented him from accompanying her into Dorsetshire.

It was yet early in the evening when the young lady arrived at Southdale; and after partaking of some little refreshment she set off to call upon her kind friends Mr. and Mrs. Milner. Little Alfred was asleep, and was accordingly left in the care of the nursemaid who was faithfully devoted to Ethel, and by no means prone to gossiping: she was not therefore likely to state at the inn that she knew there was something wrong in respect to Mr. and Mrs. Trevor, though she was ignorant of the precise circumstances.

Ethel reached the parsonage and she found Mr. and Mrs. Milner walking together in their garden. They were an elderly couple, with benevolent countenances, which were correct indices to the reading of their hearts. They had no children; their love for each other was proverbial and they were revered throughout the neighbourhood.

"Why! I do believe this is that dear Ethel Fraser!" ejaculated Mrs. Milner; "or Mrs. Trevor, as I ought to call her!"

"And so it is," added the worthy clergyman.

In a few moments Ethel's hands were warmly clasped by the friends whom she had thus come to visit; and when she shed tears, they naturally thought it was only through affectionate emotion at this meeting.

"Welcome once more to Southdale!" said the worthy couple.

"You look travel-worn, Ethel,"

added Mrs. Milner "prey walk in."

"Oh! I am not at all wearied" she said. "I rested myself at the inn——"

"What! you have put up at the inn," ejaculated Mr. Milner "instead of coming straight to us."

"It is a mere flying visit—and I am going away to-morrow. Besides, I have my servant and my little one with me——"

"Well, Ethel, I suppose you must have your own way if you choose," said Mrs. Milner. "And now tell me, my dear young friend—are you quite happy with Mr. Trevor? Let me see, what was his Christian name? Alfred to be sure!"

"I am perfectly happy," replied Ethel, with a smile that was apparently all cheerfulness, while the heart internally was almost ready to burst. "He is very much occupied at this moment—indeed he is away from home; and so, as I was on a visit to some acquaintances at Southampton, I thought I would come on as far as Southdale to see my old friends."

"And you are truly welcome," said the Milners, again pressing her hands in their own.

"And then too," added Ethel, "I had lost my marriage certificate by some accident or another—I only discovered it the other day."

"There is no harm done," said Mr. Milner: "you can easily have another copy. I am glad to see you are so particular in the matter. Married people should always have a copy of the certificate, which in this sense proves their respectability."

"And moreover," added Ethel, "I thought I should like to take another peep into the village

church——"

"You shall speedily be gratified, my dear girl," rejoined the clergyman.

"And while you are thus engaged," said Mrs. Milner, "I will see that the tea-things are got in readiness; for we must entertain you, Ethel, as well as we can."

Mr. Milner procured the key of the chest in which the parish registers were kept; and he escorted Ethel to the church. They entered; and the young lady made her way first of all to the spot where a mural tablet indicated the resting-places of her parents, Captain and Mrs. Fraser. It would be impossible to describe the perfect agony of feelings which for a few moments took possession of the unfortunate Ethel as she contemplated the spot; but she was still armed with that fortitude which prevented her from displaying more than an ordinary amount of emotion.

She drew her kerchief across her eyes, and then followed Mr. Milner towards the vestry. There the massive chest was opened; and Mr. Milner, seating himself at the table, proceeded to write out a copy of the marriage certificate.

"Surely that is Mrs. Milner's voice?" said Ethel, as the old gentleman laid down the pen and closed the massive register.

"I did not hear anything," he replied, looking at Ethel.

"Oh! I heard a voice as distinctly as possible, she answered, with an air of confidence; "and it was calling you. I am certain it was Mrs. Milner's voice!"

"We can soon see," said the clergyman; and he walked forth from the vestry.

He went as far as the door leading into the church yard; but perceiving no one, he returned, and found Ethel just replacing the last register in the chest.

"My dear young lady!" he exclaimed; "handling those dusty books! I am really quite ashamed that you should have the trouble!"

"Oh, no trouble!" she said, with an amiable smile. "But where is Mrs. Milner?"

"It was a mistake on your part, Ethel. You heard no voice——"

"Indeed?" she exclaimed, looking surprised.

"No—it was fancy on your part—perhaps some echo through the church. Have you got the certificate?"

"Thank you, I have taken possession of it: and a strange expression of sinister triumph for a moment flitted across the young lady's countenance: but it passed completely unperceived by the worthy clergyman.

They quitted the church, and retraced their way to the parsonage,—where in the meanwhile Mrs. Milner had made the most hospitable preparations for the entertainment of Ethel. They sat down to tea: but they had not been many minutes thus engaged, when a servant entered with an intimation that Farmer White from the neighbouring village of Cherry-tree requested to speak to Mr. Milner. The clergyman accordingly rose from his seat to go out and see Mr. White in the hall: but in a few moments he returned, saying, "You must excuse me for a few minutes: Farmer White wants a certificate of his son George's

marriage: for George expects to obtain the situation of bailiff to Squire Ponsford, and the testimonials must all be sent in to-morrow."

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Milner to her husband, "you can easily spare five minutes to give the certificate—and Ethel will excuse you the while."

"Oh, I was not thinking of refusing—nor do I grudge the time," exclaimed the kind-hearted Mr. Milner: "but I was going to observe how singular it was that the very next entry to yours, Mrs. Trevor, in the register is the marriage of George White. I saw it just now as I was making the copy for you."

Having thus spoken, the clergyman again quitted the apartment; and he was soon seen from the window traversing the garden in company with Farmer White. So soon as the two had entered the churchyard, Ethel started up from her seat, saying, "I am sure you will excuse me, my dear madam: but I fear I have neglected my poor child too long!"

"Why, you cannot think of leaving me at this moment?" cried Mrs. Milner. "You have scarcely had time to drink a cup of tea or eat a mouthful——"

"I have forgotten the poor child," said Ethel hastily. "I will just run into the village——"

"I will send a servant with an intimation that your maid is to bring your dear little Alfred hither. You promised that I should see the sweet child!"

"Oh, I will go and fetch him myself!" and with this ejaculation Ethel threw on her bonnet and scarf, which she had placed

upon the sofa ; and she sped from the room.

Taking leave of Ethel for a few minutes—and abandoning Mrs. Milner to the surprise which her young friend's precipitate departure excited in her mind—we must now note other incidents which were occurring in respect to the village of Southdale. A stage-coach halted at the door of the inn ; and two travellers alighted from the top. Both were dressed in a sort of sporting style ; and their appearance was not such as to induce the landlord of the tavern to let them run very far into his debt unless they presented the guarantees of substantial luggage. But all the baggage which these two individuals had brought with them, consisted of a small carpet-bag. They however changed a five-pound note as they each took a glass of ale at the bar, and made inquiries whether they could be accommodated with beds at the inn for the night. The landlord was completely reassured by the production of the note ; and he replied in a cheerful tone to the effect that he was enabled to accommodate the travellers.

Having quaffed their ale, they strolled forth into the village, and one said to the other, "What a lark this is, Jack ! Only think ! yesterday morning in London—this evening here in a little village at the farther end of Dorsetshire !"

"A lark indeed, Tim !" replied Mr. Peppercorn to the observation just made by his friend Mr. Gaffney. "And what a blessed thing it was that this here business should have turned up directly after you was so

preciously cast down about the affair at the bank !

Tim Gaffney was about to make a reply, when the sounds of another equipage rolling into the usually quiet little village of Southdale, met their ears. It was a postchaise—and a single traveller was seated inside.

"By Jove, I know who he is !" exclaimed Tim Gaffney, as the chaise swept past. "Travelling private—incog, I s'pose, as they call it. But let's go and see."

"Who is it ?" demanded Jack Peppercorn. "Don't let's go and neglect other business just to gape at a traveller getting down at an inn. Remember, we ought to go and take a survey at the Firs—"

"Hold your tongue, you fool !" rejoined Tim Gaffney. "This swell cove is a Duke, and how do we know but what it may be worth our while to look after him as well as 't other business?"

"By jingo, yes !" exclaimed Peppercorn ; and they accordingly bent their steps back again towards the tavern.

It was the young Duke of Ardleigh who alighted from the postchaise ; and the landlord at once coming forth, exclaimed with mingled joy and astonishment, "Why, Mr. Trevor, is it you ? Your good lady will be surprised ! I hope nothing has happened that you come so quickly upon her heels ?—but I'm sure she no more expects you than I should expect Squire Ponsford's daughter to come in and ask for a quartern of gin and a screw of tobacco."

"No—nothing is wrong, Mr. Goodman," said the Duke. "And so my wife—Mrs. Trevor—is here ? And the child——"

"Here also," replied the landlord.

"The beautiful infant is sleeping so nice, Mr. Trevor!" cried Mrs. Goodman, the worthy landlady, who now came hurrying down the staircase.

"Up here?"—and Herbert rushing past the landlady, sprang up the staircase.

He opened the first door at random, for he was in a state of considerable excitement; and it happened to be the room where his little son lay sleeping upon a sofa, with Susan the nursemaid seated by his side. As we have already hinted, Susan knew that something serious must have happened between her master and mistress, but she was ignorant of the particulars, and little suspected that the former bore a ducal rank. She had however learnt from Ethel's lips that everything was at an end between herself and her husband, and that they should never meet again; so that Susan started up from her chair with an ejaculation of astonishment—almost of alarm—when her master thus abruptly burst in upon her.

"Where is your mistress, Susan?"—and catching up the child, he strained it to his breast, so passionately covering it with kisses that being awakened from its sleep it began to cry.

Susan quickly gave the intimation that Mrs. Trevor had gone to see the Milners: and the ejaculation "Ah!" burst from his lips in a manner as if to imply that a suspicion he had previously conceived was now suddenly confirmed by the information just given. Hastily restoring his little Alfred to the

sofa, and imprinting another kiss upon the boy's forehead, the Duke left the room almost as abruptly as he had entered it.

Meanwhile Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn had overheard the conversation which had taken place betwixt the Duke, the landlord, and the landlady, immediately after the young nobleman had alighted from the post-chaise.

"By goles!" whispered Gaffney to his companion, "this is a rum start! Mr. Trevor—his wife, Mrs. Trevor—and the child! Oh, no! his Grace must have a mistress, then! Let's see about it."

They advanced to the bar and ordered fresh glasses of ale.

"Who is that genelman that's just arrived?" inquired Gaffney.

"Oh, that's Mr. Trevor," responded the landlord.

"Married, I suppose, by what I heard him say?"

"Yes—married to as pretty a creature as you could see in a day's march. She lived many long years in this village, at the very cottage you might have seen just at the entrance as you came along on the outside of the coach."

"To be sure, we noticed it!" observed Peppercorn. "But who is Mr. Trevor?"

"I don't know exactly," rejoined Mr. Goodman, "but I think I've heard say he was junior partner in a mercantile house in London."

"Oh, partner in a mercantile house—eh?" observed Tim Gaffney. "Well, but where did he marry the young lady you was a-speaking of?"

"Where did he marry her?" exclaimed the landlord, with an air of surprise at the question.

Why, where the deuce should I marry her but here where she had lived so many years—where her father and mother was buried in the old church—and where she was honourably wooed and won by him who is now her husband? I remember the wedding-day—it was all very quiet and private—but a prettier creature than Ethel Fraser was that morning, I never saw in all my life!”

“A werry pretty sight, I des say,” observed Tim Gaffney: and tossing off the contents of his glass, he again issued forth from the tavern, accompanied by his friend Mr. Peppercorn.

They walked on in silence till they reached the outskirts of the village nearest to the church; and then Tim Gaffney, stopping short, looked hard in his companion's face, and said, “Jack, if all this is true that the landlord has told us, we've just tumbled over a secret that will make our fortunes.”

“Why, it's nothing but a secret marriage—that's all,” interjected Peppercorn.

“You fool!” cried Gaffney; “it's no marriage at all!—it's bigamy!—that's the Duke of Ardleigh, that is!—he's been married some years and got a Duchess living in London. So don't you see—”

“By jingo, I do see!” ejaculated Peppercorn. “Why, it ought to be worth a thousand pounds to us. Surely the landlord can't have made any mistake about the wedding?”

“Impossible!” returned Gaffney. “There is evidently something up, though the landlord don't seem to suspect it. Mrs. Trevor, as she calls herself,

comes down first; then the Duke—or Mr. Trevor, as he calls himself—comes next—”

“Here he is!” ejaculated Peppercorn. “Now's the time, Tim!”

The Duke of Ardleigh was hastening through the village in the direction of the Parsonage: he observed the two men loitering by the side of the road, but little suspected that they would have anything to say to him—until Tim Gaffney stepped forward, and touching his hat, said with a knowing look, “How d'ye do, my lord?”

The Duke stopped short for a moment: he scrutinized Gaffney's face—then he surveyed the countenance of Peppercorn; but he could not recollect that he had ever seen either of them before. He was confounded by being thus accosted by persons who evidently knew him. And the significant glance which had been bent upon him by Tim Gaffney showed how useless it would be to deny himself and thus perhaps provoke an altercation.

“Who are you?” inquired Herbert, speedily recovering himself.

“My name's Timothy Gaffney at your service, my lord; and this is my friend Mr. Peppercorn—Jack Peppercorn I calls him—also at your Grace's service.”

The Duke felt infinitely disgusted at the half flippant, half familiar manner in which the fellow addressed him: but as he suddenly recollected that he had seen the two men lurking at the door of the inn when he had alighted, he at once perceived how absolutely necessary it was to propitiate and to silence them.

"Where have you seen me before," he demanded.

"At Maidstone, t'other day," responded Gaffney. "I was standing by when you bought a couple of horses of one Manning—"

"Ah! said the duke. Well—proceed."

Your Grace gave Manning a cheque: and when you was gone Manning says to me, says he 'Tim, should you like to see a Duke's handwriting?—'why? says I.—

'Because,' says he 'here it is: for that civil and polite young gentleman which has just bought the horses, is none other than the Duke of Arldeigh, and here's his cheque upon his bankers in London.—So that's the way, my lord added Tim Gaffney, with a bow "that I come to know you was the Duke of Arldeigh."

"Very well, my man" said Herbert. "Have you mentioned the fact to any one else?"—and it was with an indescribable suspense that the nobleman put the question.

"Only to my pal here, my lord

"Good! It is a secret—and you two will keep it between you, because I shall reward you handsomely. How long do you purpose to stay at Southdale?"

"Why, my lord, we've a little business which will keep us here till to-morrow morning, perhaps replied Gaffney; "but if it suits your Grace's pleasure that we should stay longer, till you have got time to talk to us, for instance—"

"I will make time to see you presently," interrupted the Duke.

"But you will not seem to know me—and above all things, be silent if you wish to be well re-

warded!"

"Mum's the word my lord" and Tim Gaffney, turning on his heel, strolled back into the village, accompanied by Jack Peppercorn.

"My God!" mentally ejaculated the Duke, as he hurried along towards the Parsonage; "how the web of difficulties and embarrassments seems to be closing in around me! At every step that I take it appers as if I was destined to founder deeper and deeper into an inextricable morass! Good heavens! what will be the end of it? Oh, when once we enter upon the path of deception, how many more falsehoods and duplicities must be adopted to sustain the first!"

An exrsrsion of indiscribable anguish swept over his countenance as these reflections passed rapidly through his brain; and then all in a moment he gave a cry of joy, for he beheld Ethel speeding towards him. She had left the Parsonage in the precipitate manner which we have described;—and now on the part of the young Duke everything was forgotten—or at least almost completely absorbed, in the thought of straining that beloved creature to his heart again.

"Ethel, dearest Ethel! he exclaimed, extending his arms to receive her.

"No! no!" and as she stopped short within half a dozen yards of him, it was with a sort of horror that she made a vehement gesture to repel his advance.

"Oh, my God, Ethel!" he cried, "drive me not to despair!"

"Despair?" and no language can convey an idea of the forlorn and desolate expression that for a moment seized upon her coun-

tenance, which from having been flushed with excitement, suddenly grew deadly pale. "But here! take these! destroy them, I, conjure you!"

"Oh! what have you done Ethel!" exclaimed the Duke, as she produced a folded piece of paper from her bosom. "My God! it is as I suspected! You have come to destroy the last trace——"

"Yes—the last trace of everything that can criminate *you*!" said Ethel, emphatically.

"Not for worlds shall you run this frightful risk!" cried the Duke.

"Ah! say you so?"—and at the very instant when he was about to snatch the folded paper from her hand, she tore it into a myriad of the minutest fragments, and flung them into the stream which flowed by the roadside. It was all the work of an instant: it was done in the twinkling of an eye; and then, as if the whole concentration of tremendous excitement which the young lady had experienced were now suddenly ended by the deed she had accomplished, she said calmly, "You are safe! Go—leave me! You have naught to apprehend on the face of the earth!"

The magnanimity of Ethel's conduct produced such an overwhelming effect upon the Duke, that he burst into a flood of tears and began sobbing violently. A fearful remorse seized upon his soul—a remorse that was likewise blended with a boundless love for that adorable creature. Oh, how his heart yearned towards her! how he longed to strain her to his breast!

"My God, Ethel!" he mur-

mured, "how utterly unworthy of all your affectionate interest have I been! Do not go! do not leave me!"

"Why did you come to Southdale? Did I not charge you in my letter to remain at your own house until you heard from me?"

"Oh! I suspected that you were coming hither," he passionately exclaimed; "and I hastened to follow you. I cannot possibly live without you!"

"I may not listen to such language as this:" and she spoke coldly and severely; but here was an unnatural calmness—for while her looks maintained a forced rigidity, her heart was ready to burst with the volcanic emotions that filled it.

"For heaven's sake, hear me!" cried the Duke "hear me, by all the love you have borne me! by the love I bear for you! hear me for the sake of our child,"

Ethel started visibly: but instantaneously repressing the outward betrayal of her emotion, she said, "Have you seen *our*—the child?"

"*Our* child, our child!" cried the Duke. "Yes!—and I have covered the dear boy with kisses! Oh, Ethel! you will not separate him from his father! My wife—start not!—Oh, do not bend upon me that look so forlorn—so desolate! Listen, Ethel—listen! All is not so bad as you think! My wife's conduct is most admirable! She will never interfere with us—she will allow us to live together unmolested——"

"Enough! enough!" almost shrieked Ethel. "Speak not thus—or you will force me to break a vow which I have solemnly taken within my own heart! You will make me re-

approach you. Sooner would I perish than live with you as your mistress! sooner would I die than wilfully become the paramour of an adulterous husband! No! no!—not all my love or you could induce me thus to plunge deeper down into the vortex of degradation and misery! Leave me, I conjure you!”

“Never, never will I leave you, Ethel!” exclaimed Herbert, goaded almost to madness, “until I shall have succeeded in shaking a resolve which can only tend to entail eternal misery on us both!”

“Oh! if you detain me here, you will bring utter destruction on my head!” cried Ethel. “Let me hasten to depart from the village! If you knew the risk that I ran——”

“Risk? My God! I comprehend it!” exclaimed the Duke, literally wringing his hands in the wild frenzy of his affliction. “Fly, Ethel! fly! But, oh! let me be the companion of your flight!”

“It is too late,” she said, again displaying that cold unnatural calmness which we have before noticed. “Look! they come. Let them do their work—I shall deny it—and you will not betray me.”

The Duke glanced in the direction of the parsonage; and he beheld three personages approaching with hasty footsteps. Nothing could exceed the terrible excitement that seized upon him as he judged from Ethel’s word the danger that was now threatening her.

“Fly, fly, dearest!” he frantically exclaimed.

“If you ever loved me” she said in a tone of the most imploring earnestness and with a look of

the most appealing entreaty, “I adjure you to be calm! If you value my safety I beseech you to afford me the only chance of ensuring it, by taking refuge in utter and complete denial of the deed! Act thus for the sake of that love whereby I have adjured you!”

“Ethel! I am almost heartbroken!” responded the wretched young nobleman; “but I will do as you desire; your words shall be laws for me.”

The three persons who came from the direction of the parsonage, were now close upon the spot; they were the clergyman, Farmer White, and Gibson, the parish sexton.

“Oh, Mrs. Trevor! Oh! Mr. Trevor!” cried the worthy Milner, overwhelmed with grief, and the tears were running down his cheeks; “is it possible that *you*, Ethel, could have done this? In the name of mercy what motive had you? But give up the abstracted leaf and the matter shall be hushed up!”

“There is no matter to be hushed up wherein I may be concerned,” answered Ethel.

“Mr. Trevor, I adjure you,” said the worthy and afflicted clergyman, drawing the Duke aside, if you for any reason have influenced your wife in this unhappy proceeding——”

“Mr. Milner,” interrupted Ethel whose quick ear had caught the kind old gentleman’s words, “as there is a God above us, and as I have a soul to be saved I swear to you that Mr. Trevor has in no way influenced, directly or indirectly, any proceeding which I have adopted. Accuse not therefore *him*! But if you think *me* guilty of anything, deal with *me*

as you fancy I ought to be dealt with. Ah! I will add something more—and to the truth of this assertion also I invoke the testimony of heaven. It is that methought I was coming secretly and stealthily to Southdale, without Trevor's knowledge—Indeed I wrote him a letter, while he was in London, in the hope of throwing him as it were off the right scent but by some means, as yet unknown to myself, he suspected that I was coming hither, and he followed me. All that I have just told you, Mr. Milner, is as true as the Gospel and therefore, I repeat, deal with *me* only, if there be anyone to be dealt with!"

While Ethel was thus speaking Mr. Milner studied her countenance attentively, and when she had finished, he again turned aside to the Duke of Ardleigh, hastily whispering, "Can it be an aberration of the intellect?"

"Yes, yes! it is!", quickly responded the young nobleman, seizing upon the idea with avidity "I have often thought she was deranged!"

Though both the clergyman and the Duke spoke in the lowest possible tones, yet Ethel heard what passed betwixt them. *This* time, however, she did not think fit to interpose any remark or offer any observation.

"Mr. Trevor," said the clergyman, bending upon Ethel a look of so much distress and sympathy that if he had been her own father he could not have displayed more suffering on her account, "This is a most unfortunate affair! By your bewildered looks I can only too easily suppose that you are ignorant of what has been done. You heard me say some-

thing of an abstracted leaf—it was a leaf of the marriage register to which I alluded—and that has been taken by your wife! I am now under the painful necessity—Good heavens, that such a necessity should arise in reference to one whom I have known from her childhood—but—but it is a duty!"

The worthy clergyman's voice was choked with sobs—he could say no more; but Gibson the sexton, who was a sworn constable stepped forward and said, "It's a hard thing to do—the hardest I've ever done: but I can't help it. Mrs. Trevor, you must consider yourself my prisoner."

Whiter grew Ethel's already pale face; and for a moment her ashy lip quivered—and she said in a low voice. "If I go to prison my child——"

"Shall accompany you, unhappy young lady!" replied the clergyman, who was at length enabled to master his emotions.

"And now," said the sexton, "we must make a move to Squire Ponsford's."

CHAPTER XIII.

ETHEL.

The seat of Squire Ponsford Deputy Lieutenant and Justice of the Peace, was at a distance of a mile from Southdale; and Mr. Milner suggested that they should all walk thither, as there was no need to be hasty in spreading the scandal of what had occurred throughout the village. The Duke eagerly adopted the suggestion. Ethel's appearance was now coldly listless,

and she remained silent—as if by her demeanour she studied to support the idea which she had heard thrown out, to the effect that she was suffering under an aberration of the intellect. During the walk of about twenty minutes from the village to the mansion, Ethel kept betwixt Mr. Milner and the constable. She would not permit the duke a moment's opportunity of approaching her or breathing a whispered word in her ear. He comprehended the policy of this portion of her conduct: it was to prevent it from being thought that in whatsoever might be proved against her, she had acted under his influence, — an impression which might arise if they stealthily exchanged communications.

The Firs, as Squire Ponsford's seat was denominated, was an old red brick building, rambling in style and incongruous in the varieties of its architecture, situated in the midst of a spacious park, and having a background of hill to a tremendous height. The dusk was closing in as the party reached the front door; and in the midst of the increasing obscurity, no one observed that they had been followed from the village by Messrs. Gaffney and Peppercorn. These two individuals had however observed the meeting of the clergyman the farmer, and the sexton; and though they had not caught a syllable of anything that passed, yet they observed sufficient to induce them to believe that something of no ordinary character was transpiring; and thus they had followed the party to watch the result. But when they found that the destination was the Firs, they exchanged ejaculations expres-

sive of surprise, as if they also had originally come into the neighbourhood for the purpose of transacting some little business at that same countryseat.

The front door was opened by a portly middle-aged footman, to whom Mr. Milner said, "I am afraid we are about to disturb your master at a somewhat unseasonable hour: but it is an urgent case.

"Please to walk in, sir;"—and the footman led the way into the library, leaving the door of that room as well as the front door open, in obedience to a general instruction which he had received, the proceedings before a magistrate being public.

In a very few minutes Mr. Ponsford made his appearance. He was a person of about sixty—having naught in his appearance of the country Squire, but much more likely to be taken for a gentleman who habitually dwelt amidst the crowds of fashionable circles. He was dressed in black, with a white waistcoat: his countenance was pale, with a serious if not severe expression: his features were decidedly handsome: he was a little above the medium stature, and inclined to portliness without being corpulent. Altogether his appearance might even merit the term "distinguished."

On entering the library, he shook hands with Mr. Milner—nodded to Farmer White with a certain degree of haughty reserve—and merely bestowed the most transient glance upon the Duke and Ethel as he proceeded to place himself at the head of the table. He then at once saw that it was a case of some prisoner being charged before him,

and that Ethel was the offender ; for the constable, according to his wont, made the captive stand at the lower extremity of the table.

"Before I enter upon the case," said Mr. Ponsford, "I must observe that my clerk is not present ; and therefore if there be copious depositions to take, we must wait until we can send into the village to fetch him."

"I do not think the case will be a long one," said Mr. Milner. "If it be only as brief as it is distressing——"

"Let us enter upon it," curtly interjected the Squire, with a significance of tone and look which implied that no one ought to seek to bias his mind for or against the prisoner by any extraneous comment. "Who charges this?"—he hesitated for an instant ; he was inclined to say "*lady*," for there was something unspeakably fascinating and lady-like in Ethel's appearance ; but he checked himself and said "Who charges this *person*?"

"It is with infinite regret," began Mr. Milner, "that I have to answer to your worship's demand. Perhaps you may recollect that this young lady lived for a number of years in the village——"

"What is the prisoner's name?" inquired the Justice.

"Tell his worship your name" hastily whispered the sexton.

But Ethel remained silent and appeared to look unmoved upon the proceedings ; so that Mr. Milner continued to make his statement.

The young lady's name is Ethel Trevor : she is married ; and I am compelled by a sense of duty to charge her with the

abstraction of a leaf from the parish register of marriages."

"Where is the leaf?" inquired Mr. Ponsford.

"I know not," answered the clergyman. "The prisoner may have it about her ; and if so, I am sure that I should not wish to press the charge."

"Let the prisoner be searched," interrupted the magistrate. "Gibson, remove her."

Ethel was conducted into another room, where Mr. Ponsford's house-keeper and a maid servant searched her—but without effect. We may here seize upon the opportunity to remark that all the domestics of the establishment were gathered at the door of the library to listen to the proceedings ; for Ethel was well known by name and by sight to most of them, and the fact of her being arrested on a charge which was so grave and which seemed so extraordinary had excited a considerable sensation. Miss Ponsford, the Squire's only child—a beautiful girl of about eighteen—peeped down the staircase from the drawing-room landing at Ethel when she was conducted into the room where she was examined ; and the young lady's heart was moved towards the unfortunate creature. We must furthermore add that when Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn saw the front door thrown wide open after the admission of the little party, their experience in the proceedings before country magistrates at once enabled them to comprehend that it was a judicial inquiry of some sort or another—and they boldly entered the hall. Squire Ponsford prided himself on the publicity which was

always given to examinations that took place before him: his servants therefore took their cue from their master; and when one of the domestics beheld Gaffney and Peppercorn, he bade them advance to the door of the library.

Ethel having been examined by the housekeeper and the servant-maid—an ordeal through which she passed with an air of vacant indifference—was reconducted to the library.

"Has my paper been found upon her person?" inquired the justice.

The sexton made the report which he had received from the housekeeper, to the effect that no paper had been found.

"Under what circumstances was the leaf of the register extracted?" asked Squire Ponsford.

"Mrs. Trevor called upon me," answered Mr. Milner; "and in the course of conversation she expressed a wish to have a copy of her marriage certificate,—alleging that she had lost the one she received at her nuptials. I took her to the church and produced the registers. While there, I quitted the vestry for a few minutes——"

"Did you leave the prisoner in the vestry?" asked the magistrate.

"I did," replied the clergyman.

"And had she access to the register?"

"I am bound to confess that she had. Perhaps the duty which I owe society also compels me to state that I temporarily left the vestry in consequence of the prisoner suddenly declaring that she heard the voice of Mrs. Milner calling me. I went out to see——"

"And what followed?"

"My wife was not there—and I supposed that Mrs. Trevor——"

"The prisoner you mean," interrupted the magistrate severely.

"Yes, your worship—the prisoner. I supposed that she must have been mistaken."

"Was she standing near the registers? were they open? or was there anything in her manner to make you suspect foul play?"

"The prisoner was putting away the registers: I thought the proceeding natural enough—I regarded it as an act of kindness intended to save me trouble. We went in to tea; and Farmer White requested me to give him a particular certificate. I took him to the vestry; and my consternation may be more easily imagined than described when I found that a leaf of the marriage register had been torn out! Indeed I was bewildered: I could even then scarcely believe that Mrs. Trevor—the prisoner I mean—had done it. I hastened home; but, alas! it was then scarcely possible to doubt—In a word, sir," added the clergyman, thus abruptly concluding his speech, "the prisoner had fled."

"What excuse did she make for leaving the house during your absence?"

"The excuse might be a very natural one," Mr. Milner hastened to exclaim; "and if we could by any possibility account for the destruction of the leaf without attributing the deed to the prisoner——"

"You are not to make a speech for the defence, Mr. Milner," said the magistrate for a moment

suffering his features to relax into a deprecating smile. "What excuse did she make to leave your house?"

"The excuse that a mother might well make," responded Milner—"that of having to go and look after her child. And now, your worship, you will permit me to add my belief that the unfortunate young lady is suffering under an aberration of the intellect."

"What makes you think so?" inquired Mr. Ponsford.

"Several reasons," answered the clergyman. "In the first place, who can conceive a wife in her sound senses destroying the evidence of her own marriage? In the second place, her husband assures me that he has for some time past thought that her brain was affected. Thirdly," continued Mr. Milner, lowering his voice almost to a whisper, "her behaviour when she was arrested was so strange—she addressed me in such a singular style—her looks were so vacant and wandering—and altogether there was something so peculiar in the way in which she took this most serious accusation, that I have no doubt as to her mental derangement. Finally, if your worship will only contemplate her now, you will see that her mien is not that of a rational person."

"Can you conceive any possible motive," asked the magistrate, turning towards the Duke, "that might lead your wife to seek the destruction of that particular leaf in the register?"

"Oh, no! no!" sobbed the young nobleman, who throughout the examination had been labouring under the most terrible excite-

ment; for the bare idea of his beloved Ethel being dragged through such an ordeal, and all on account of her magnanimous behaviour on his part, was fraught with the anguish of excruciation.

"If your worship will remand the prisoner," said Mr. Milner, "until the state of her mind can be investigated, I will myself give bail for her appearance. Or," he added, in a whisper, "you may surely let her go on her husband's recognizances?"

"No," said the magistrate, shaking his head: "it is a felony, and I cannot take bail. I have heard sufficient to induce me to commit the prisoner for trial. I may possibly share your opinion in reference to her mind but that is a subject of consideration for a jury. I must commit in this case to Dorchester gaol."

The Duke of Ardleigh gave so sudden a start that all eyes were fixed upon him: for a few moments he gasped as if endeavoring to give utterance to some words which stuck in his throat; and then he suddenly turned towards Ethel, whose hand he took and strained to his lips. That hand she abandoned for an instant; and then she firmly and resolutely withdrew it.

"I understand it all!" hastily whispered the worthy clergyman to the magistrate. "She has taken some unaccountable aversion to her own husband! Alas, poor monomaniac! Your worship will make an order that she may have her child with her in the gaol? for in the present state of her mind it would perhaps goad her to utter madness to be separated from it."

"I will allow the child to accompany her to Dorchester," replied Squire Ponsford; "but it must then be left to the discretion of the civil and medical authorities of the gaol whether the infant be permitted to remain with her."

Ethel averted her eyes from the young Duke: but heaven knows it was not through aversion. It was through tear lest while gazing on him whom she had loved so devotedly, and whom she still loved—the father of her child—the whole structure of her courage should give way, and all the unnatural calmness she had maintained should in a moment dissolve in agonized weeping, or change into paroxysms of maniac lamentation accompanied by piercing screams.

"Let me get her away into another room, apart from the gaze of the people," hastily whispered Mr. Milner in the Duke's ear; "and do you keep out of her sight. I beseech you to do this; for her mind is evidently fraught with a morbid aversion towards you—and that is no doubt the reason she sought to destroy the evidence of your marriage."

"But how will she go to Dorchester? and what about the poor child?" demanded Herbert, in quick petulant tones; for he was full of agony throughout—mentally and physically—and enraged against all the world, with the single exception of the lovely and magnanimous creature who had thus sacrificed herself for his sake.

I am just going to send off for a postchaise," answered Milner, who making every allowance for

the Duke's hastiness and petulance, was mild and benevolent in his demeanour; "and Squire Ponsford will allow your unfortunate wife to stay here till the vehicle comes. Farmer White is going to see about it; and he will also so arrange that the chaise shall bring up your nursemaid and your child, together with the effects that your poor Ethel may have brought with her."

The Duke of Ardleigh suddenly became ashamed of his impatience; and seizing the worthy clergyman's hand, he pressed it with the most grateful effusion.

"Thanks! a thousand thanks!" he murmured, in a broken voice.

"Oh, if every Christian minister were like you! But, Ah! to look upon that angelic face, so full of beauty and sweetness—and to think—to think that she is going to a gaol—my God?" 'tis enough to drive me mad!"

"Calm yourself, my young friend!" said Milner: "exert your Christian fortitude! Your poor wife is certain to be acquitted, and then you will be enabled to devote every attention to her. But get you away for the present—and I will conduct her to another apartment."

Herbert rushed from the room: the servants, who all knew him by sight as Mr. Trevor, made way for him with every display of courtesy and every evidence of sympathy—he felt the want of fresh air—he seemed to be in the midst of a stifling atmosphere—it was as if he were suffocating. He was hurrying towards the front door, when he suddenly caught sight of Gaffney and Peppercorn—an idea struck him—he made a hasty sign for them to follow—

and he left the house where he had passed through an ordeal more terrible than even that through which poor Ethel had been dragged; for he hated and loathed himself as the cause of all her miseries—whereas she on the other hand had been sustained by the consciousness that hers was a self-martyrdom endured on account of him whom she had loved so tenderly and so well!

Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn were too cautious and wary to follow the Duke instantaneously out of the hall, as by so doing it would betray that he had beckoned them; and they remembered his injunction that they were not to seem to know him. They therefore lounged out a few minutes after he had taken his departure; and when once in the obscurity of the park, they sped after him. They found him waiting impatiently for their appearance; and he petulantly ejaculated, "I thought you were never coming."

"You told us to be discreet," responded Gaffney, "and so, if we've done wrong in obeying your Grace's own orders—"

"Hush!" interjected Ardleigh "Yes, yes—I see that you are disreputable—and I am rejoiced at it! Now, if I mistake not, you are men who have no objection to earn money without being over nice——"

"To come to the point at once, my lord," said Tim Gaffney, "there isn't two men in all the country that likes to make money more than we do, or that is less particular how we make it. So don't be afraid, my lord, to speak out your mind to us—for I think there's something you

want to say."

"You are acquainted with a certain secret of mine," resumed Herbert: "and I mean to give a thousand pounds to keep it."

Exclamations of joy burst from the lips of Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn; and they could scarcely restrain themselves from hugging the Duke in their delight at this unexpected liberality.

"But that is not all," resumed Herbert. "I will give you another thousand pounds if that young lady—you know whom I mean"—and he pointed towards the mansion—"is enabled to escape from the constable who will presently be directed to convey her in a postchaise to Dorchester."

"It shall be done my lord," replied Tim Gaffney, with the emphasis of one who felt confident of achieving that which he promised. Give us an earnest of your Grace's liberality, and trust to us for the rest. We want no better pay master than your lordship."

Herbert drew forth his pocket book; and by the light of the moon which was now rising, he counted ten bank-notes for a hundred pounds each."

"There," he said, "is the wish money in respect to my secret. The other thousand pounds shall be forth-coming when the work you have undertaken is accomplished."

"And if we find any difficulty," said Tim Gaffney, "in changing the notes, your Grace will help us to turn them into gold?"

"Come to me at my house in London," rejoined the Duke quickly, "and I will give you bags of gold in exchange for the notes. No one need know why

you call upon me or who you are. You can pretend that you have horses to sell—or in short invent any excuse you like!"

"Good, my lord," said Pepper corn; "that's speaking like a brick. Your Grace's business shall be done. Tim Gaffney knows me and I know Tim Gaffney; and when we two puts our heads or hands together to transact a bit of business, it isn't our fault if it ain't done in a right superior style. Now, my lord, have you any futher orders? and what's to be done with the young lady when she's set free?"

"I know all this part of the country well," resumed the Duke "I have fished in all the streams far many miles around;"—and he sighed deeply as he thought of the days of dreamy happiness when, a sojourner at Southdale, he was wooing the lovely Ethel Fraser. "You of course know the road the post-chaise will presently take?"

"To be sure, my lord," replied Gaffney. "It's the same we took only in a contrary direction, when coming by the stage from Dorchester, this afternoon."

"Good!" observed the Duke "At a distance of seven miles along the road, is the village of Eleanor's Cross; and I will be waiting for you with a vehicle of some kind just about a couple of miles beyond that village. I shall go and start off at once—and you have no time to lose."

"Trust to us, my lord," interjected Gaffney. "So now let's away to business."

The two men hastened off at a running pace towards a fence at a little distance; while the Duke pursued his way along the avenue of the park leading

towards the village. He soon gained the inn; and he was delighted to find that no messenger had as yet arrived from the Firs to order the postchaise to convey Ethel to Dorchester; so that the intelligence of what had happened was as yet unknown at the hostelry. The Duke ordered the chaise that had brought him to be gotten in immediate readiness; and he said in a whisper to the landlord.

"I am going with all possible speed to Dorchester on very important business indeed."

"Why, surely, Mr. Trevor," said Mr. Goodman, with an air of surprise, "you are not going to see the prize fight?"

"What do you mean?" asked the Duke.

"Why, sir, don't say a word," responded the landlord; "but those two men which came these evening by the stage, are concerned in a fight which is to come off somewhere along the road—of course I don't exactly know where, because these sort of fellows always tell you one place when they mean another in order to throw you off the scent. But they've asked for my phaeton—it's just getting ready for them—though betwixt you and me, Mr. Trevor, I shouldn't have let 'em have it if they hadn't lodged a fifty pound note in my hand. So it's all right."

"What?" said the Duke, inwardly admiring the astuteness of his two agents' proceedings; "do you think they are prize-fighters?"

"Lord, no, Mr. Trevor!" replied Goodman: "they're what's called the backers. But these kind of fellows always have plenty of money. Of course

they only whispered to me as a great secret that they're connected with the prize-fight, just to account for their wanting the phaeton; and so, as I don't want to spoil their game——"

"Nor I either," added Herbert "and therefore I shall not breathe a word of all you have been telling me."

He strolled forth of the tavern; and at the same moment the hostler was bringing round from stables a neat phaeton and a very decent-looking animal. Messrs. Gaffney and Peppercorn, having just disposed of a little hot brandy and water, were lighting their cigars; and they both flung rapid looks of significancy upon the nobleman. They then took their seats in the phaeton, and drove away at a smart pace. Herbert was just thinking of hastening upstairs to bestow a kiss upon his child, when his own postchaise made its appearance; and flinging himself upon the seat inside, he gave the order in a loud voice "To Dorchester!"

About four miles outside of Southdale, the phaeton was seen stopping at the door of a wayside public-house; and by the light which streamed forth from that door, the figures of tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn might be perceived. They were drinking more brandy-and-water: but Herbert well knew that this was only an excuse to allow the chaise that was to convey Ethel to pass along the road to some spot convenient for stopping it.

"God grant that the plan may succeed!" exclaimed the young Duke to himself: and then, with a deep sense of anguish, he added, "It would kill me—Oh, it

would break my heart, to see my poor Ethel consigned to a dungeon!"

The chaise rolled on: the village of Eleanor's Cross was presently reached; and when the equipage had passed a couple of miles beyond, the Duke called to the postillion to stop.

"Now, my good fellow," he said, as the man leapt down from his horse and came up to the door, "something will perhaps presently take place which it were just as well to conceal. It is no highway robbery—still less a murder: it is only the rescue of a young lady who has no business to be in custody. Do you think you can hold your tongue on the subject if I give you twenty guineas?"

"Well, sir, I think I can," answered the postboy, with a grin.

"But if you can't for the mere sake of the bribe," added the Duke, "perhaps you may be enabled to do so when I tell you that if the business is found out every one engaged in it will stand a chance of being transported—By the bye, have you a wife and children?"

Yes—a wife and six childer," was the response.

"Well then, for the sake of your wife and six children you had better keep a still tongue in your head. Is it a bargain?"

"Yes, sir," rejoined the postboy,—adding with another grin, "When I can chink the blunt in this here breeches-pocket——"

"Then let it be a bargain at once!" and Herbert counted the money into the man's hand. "Now, my good fellow," he continued, "we will just halt

here until the incident takes place. If any other equipage drives by, or any way-farer passes, you can be pretending to be fastening a strap or picking out a stone from the foot of one of the horses—anything to make a pretence for stopping.”

“All right, sir :” and the Duke found the postillion was entirely of that degree of astuteness as to render him worthy of being a coadjutor in an enterprise wherein as Messrs. Gaffney and Pepper-corn were engaged.

Half an hour elapsed—a tedious wearisome half hour for the Duke of Ardleigh, and fraught with the most anxious suspense. At length the sounds of wheels and a horse’s hoofs advancing rapidly from behind, were heard; and Herbert leapt out from the chaise. A phaeton with a double freight of people, was driving along; there were two females in it besides two men; and, O joy! Herbert now recognised them. The phaeton drew up; and the Duke sprang forward to assist Ethel to alight. She merely laid her hand upon his shoulder for a moment—and her feet touched the ground. He aided Susan to descend: and he affectionately patted the cheek of the sleeping child as he did so.

“Now hasten into the chaise!” he exclaimed; “hasten!”

“One word!” said Ethel, in a low but firm voice.

She stepped a few paces aside, and went on saying, “I will avail myself of the further assistance you have so considerably afforded, on the *one* condition only—that you go not with me!”

“Oh, Ethel! Ethel let me see you in safety!”—and the Duke

actually clasped his hands in the urgency of his appeal.

“If you persist,” replied Ethel, “I shall return to the spot where the postchaise has been left with the postillion and the sexton both bound and gagged. I will surrender myself into the constable’s custody again—”

“My God! what misery for both. But do as you like, dearest and best beloved; it is your safety only that I think of or care for.”

“Now you speak as I could wish,” answered Ethel, “and I will go in that case. Farewell.”

“What! no kiss? no grasp of the hand?”

“My hand—yes!” and she gave it him.

“Oh, Ethel, Ethel!” murmured the Duke, in a broken suffocating voice, as he strained that hand to his lips: “is it possible that we are to part—that you tear yourself away from me—and that I must likewise separate from this dear infant?”

“Yes—it must be so,” answered Ethel, firmly, yet not severely: and she withdrew her hand. “Farewell.”

“You want money, Ethel—”

“No. I have enough for my purposes. Nothing was taken from me when I was searched at the magistrate’s house.”

“And that document, Ethel” pursued the young Duke, “sealed up in the envelope—which you received the other day from Mr. Warren the stock-broker”

“I have taken care of that document,” replied Ethel; “not from any selfish feeling, because I can work for my own bread; but for the sake—for the sake—her voice trembled for a moment, then instantaneously rendering it firm again she said, “for the

sake of that dear child."

"Oh" suffer me to double the amount, Ethel! said Herbert, in an impassioned tone.—"to treble or quadruple it!"

"No," interrupted the young lady, "that sum is sufficient. But tell me—are you sure that there will be no difficulty in the way of my making use of the interest of that money?"

"No difficulty, Ethel," replied the Duke. "When you open the envelope, you will comprehend why I directed Warren so to seal it, and why I enjoined you not to examine the contents until after my death. But now all those precautions have been rendered needless—and you may break the seal."

"Farewell," said Ethel, "and—and—may God Almighty give you happiness!"

"One word more!" sobbed the Duke, whose heart seemed to be well-nigh broken. Will you not write to me from time to time, if only to tell me that dear little Alfred is in good health?"

"Yes, yes," replied Ethel, hurriedly: and she hastened to take her seat in the chaise.

Herbert now took the child and strained it to his breast; again and again he pressed the infant to his heart; and then he restored it to the care of the nursemaid, who was already seated by Ethel's side in the vehicle.

"God bless thee, Ethel," murmured the young Duke; "and may heaven likewise protect our dear child!"

"Farewell," replied Ethel, in a voice that was scarcely audible; and then she added, in a firmer tone, "I conjure you to let this scene end at once!"

Herbert closed the door of the chaise: the postillion, who was already mounted, whipped his horses—and the equipage rolled away. All the unnatural courage which had hitherto sustained Ethel, now suddenly broke down: she burst forth into an agony of weeping—she wrung her hands in despair and then straining her child to her bosom she continued to weep and sob over the infant, heedless of the entreaties of the good-hearted Susan that she would tranquillize herself, and be comforted with the hope of better times.

When the postchaise rolled away from the spot, the young Duke felt as if he were being separated from everything on earth that was worth living for: but no more tears came from his eyes—and not another sob convulsed his heart. A blank despair seized upon him.

"Beg pardon, my lord," said Tim Gaffney, approaching and touching his hat; "but it won't do for us to remain loitering here after the business that has just taken place."

"True!" said the Duke, awakened from the forlorn and desolate reverie into which he sank as the postchaise disappeared from his view. You must take me with you to Dorchester." Then having seated himself in the phaeton along with the two men, he inquired, "did you accomplish the business in such a way as to ensure your own safety in case of a hue and cry?"

"We have no fear on that score, my lord," responded Gaffney. "The constable couldn't recognise us again—and the postboy wouldn't do it."

"Ah! is it so?" ejaculated the Duke. "But explain yourself."

"Why, my lord," rejoined Gaffney, "for the sake of a five pun' note the postboy agreed to be knocked off his horse and to be stunned on the spot, so that he might be bound hand and foot without any difficulty. Of course, therefore, the rap on the head we gave him was a werry gentle one, and he tipped me a knowing wink when he laid upon the ground and ought to have been stunned. So Jack Peppercorn and me, with black masks on our faces——"

"Yes, my lord," interjected Jack, coolly, "we always make it a rule to travel with masks in our pockets. It's sometimes convenient to have'em ready for use."

"Well, as I was saying," continued Gaffney, "we opened the door of the chaise in a jiffey, we drags out Gibson the constable—we whips a handkerchief over his head, and ties it round his neck—we binds him hand and foot—and we lays him alongside of the postboy. Then we gets the lady and the nursemaid to the phaeton, which we had left a little further a-head, and there's an end of the business."

"It was cleverly done," remarked the Duke of Ardleigh, "and you will presently have the promised reward."

On the outskirts of the town of Dorchester, the Duke counted out a second sum of a thousand pounds in Bank of England notes; and having bestowed the amount on his two delighted coadjutors, he separated, from them. Carrying his carpet-bag in his hand, he sought the nearest hotel, where he ordered a post-

chaise to be gotten in immediate readiness, his intention being to return with the least possible delay to London.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CIRCUS.

How crowded was Astley Theatre!—and how tediously did the first piece seem to drag its slow length along, before the performances in the circle commenced! No one cared for the tremendous rant of the hero of that piece, although he represented some grand historic character who had won countless battles and was now on the point of leading a mighty army to another victory. Nor was the enthusiasm of any one particularly excited when that mighty army, consisting of six terrific-looking warriors on horseback, thirteen supernumeraries, carpenters, and scene-shifters, clad in picturesque uniforms which looked wonderfully well at a distance, came tramping across the stage, led by that wonderful hero. Neither were the sympathies of the softer sex particularly enlisted when the heroine of the piece—who of course could be nothing less than a princess of very high degree—went looking over the battle-field for her lover, giving vent ever and anon to such passionate outbursts of woe as indeed completely out-did everything which usually occurs in real life. But all curiosity, all emotion, and all excitement appeared to be suspended or kept back, to be concentrated

presently on one object—the favourite without whose presence at the house there would have been comparatively empty benches.

And during that tedious piece which opened the performances, how many were the whispered conjectures that were exchanged in pit, boxes, and gallery, relative to Mademoiselle Imogene! Some wondered whether she had yet arrived at the theatre—others whether she dressed there or before she came; some hoped that she would take particular attitudes, because they set off her beautiful form to such advantage; and others, carrying their speculations to still more mysterious and delicate topics marvelled whether she were privately married or whether she lived under the protection of anybody—or whether it were true that, as some people affirmed, she was a model of virtue—or whether faith might be attached to the rumour which was occasionally whispered abroad to the effect that Mademoiselle Imogene was a mother without being a wife.

At length the first piece terminated to the infinite satisfaction of every one of the spectators; and the performances in the circle presently began. In came the clown, furnished with the usual supply of ugly faces, and jokes of such immense platitude that nowhere else would they be received as jokes at all; but at Astley's everybody seems to consider oneself bound as a matter of course, or even as a veritable point of honour to laugh at the clown. Besides, on this occasion the audience were now getting into a particularly

good humour, as the moment was rapidly approaching when Mademoiselle Imogene was to make her appearance.

As the reader has already seen it was her usual custom to dress at her own lodgings, whence, enveloped in a cloak, she hastily made her way to the theatre; and she generally managed to arrive only a few minutes before her services were actually required in the performance. She thus avoided as much as possible the necessity of coming in contact with the other performers, amongst whom she had no friendship except with Alice Denton and a young French girl named Rose. And then too, if there were any lounging intruders behind the scenes,—any of those gentish young fellows who dress in the style of half-groom, half-gamekeeper and constantly have a quizzing-glass stuck in their eye—if, we say, there were any of these impertinent puppies lurking behind the scenes, Miss Hartland was enabled to escape from any lengthened order of their insolent looks and perhaps equally bold overtures towards conversation.

And now, amidst the triumphal music of the orchestra, Mademoiselle Imogene makes her appearance in the circus. She does not glide in on foot to curtsy in the midst, and then accept the assistance of a groom to mount:—but she comes dashing in with *eclat*, guiding three horses at the same time, and standing on the back of the central one—for they are abreast. And with what tremendous enthusiasm is she received! It is a veritable enthusiasm—genuine

and sincere: there is no affectation in it, for Imogen is indeed an immense favourite. Notwithstanding the mystery which seems more or less to enshroud her moral character, she is as great a favourite with the ladies as with the gentlemen. There is so much honest frankness in her looks—she is so exceedingly beautiful—her figure is so striking and brilliant—and all her gestures display so much refined elegance and grace, that the female portion of the audience are actually proud of her as they might be of any splendid specimen of their own sex. And then too, there is nothing wanton in her movements: her regards, always vivacious, never seem to sett'e into an expression of immodest encouragement upon any male admirer who may be putting himself forward to attract her notice. Although there is, naturally something softly sensuous in the part which she performs, arrayed as she is in that fantastic dress,—yet it is impossible to say but that the strictest propriety characterizes her proceedings in that circle. For these reasons, therefore, the women like her, and she is so great a favourite with them. But not the less welcome is her appearance to the male portion of the assemblage. She rides with such mingled ease and fearlessness! she poëties, as it were, her attitudes and her postures, as if she were illustrating all the most graceful positions which ever could have been conceived by ancient sculptors in reference to the female form! She soars above the common level of equestrian performance: she throws *sentiment* into it—

she endows it with *intellectuality*. Yet she does not open her lips—unless it be to smile affably when acknowledging the plaudits of the spectators: she neither speaks nor sings; and yet she exercises all the power of an actress upon those who contemplate her. Ah! and how many of the male sex also congregate there to feast their eyes upon her fine form, and to suffer the fancy to revel in rapturous imaginings while following with the eye the flowing lines and swelling contours which the picturesque garb defines or delineates.

In a retired part of the theatre—at the back of the great mass of the crowd—stood a young man whose eyes were riveted upon the beautiful equestrian; but not with the same gross sensual feelings that inspired so many others of his own sex who were at the same time devouring her with their regards. It was with the fervour of tenderest admiration mingled with a strange pensive melancholy that this young gentleman contemplated Imogen Hartland. He beheld nobody but her: he seemed to be utterly isolated as it were from the rest of the assemblage—isolated by his own thoughts—unaware that he was in the vicinage of so many of his fellow-creatures—intent only on the *one* object which thus absorbed all his attention. For as the reader may have already conjectured, this young gentleman was Launcelot Osborne.

All of a sudden some one laid a hand upon his shoulder, and said in a familiar tone, "Well, Osborne, my dear fellow, how

are you?"

Launcelot started: he was suddenly awakened as it were from a dream: he became all in a moment conscious of the assemblage that was there, the brilliant gas-lights that were burning, and all the circumstances by which he was surrounded. A blush overspread his countenance: but almost immediately recovering himself, he said in a somewhat reserved and cold tone, "Good evening, Mr. Casey."

"Splendid creature—isn't she?" said Sylvester, sticking his glass into the socket of his right eye so as to concentrate his visual rays upon Imogen. "Stunning performance! By Jove, she's a brick of a rider!"

"Yes—she rides admirably!" faltered Launcelot.

"I mean to get an introduction to her," pursued Sylvester Casey, with a certain knowing self-sufficient air. "It isn't every one, however, who can do *that*; for she's deuced particular, and plays the prude as well as she manages those three prads. But I'm behind the scenes to a certain extent——"

"You, Mr. Casey?" said Launcelot.

"Why the devil are you so formal with me?" demanded Sylvester. "I think we ought to drop the *Mister* betwixt us; for ain't you going to be my brother-in-law? and isn't it all settled?"

"I beg your pardon," said Launcelot: "I was perhaps rather too ceremonious. But you were telling me that you were behind the scenes to a certain extent?"

"Of course I am," ejaculated Sylvester, as if there ought not to have been any doubt or igno-

rance on the point. "I tell you what, old fellow—since circumstances place you and me on an intimate footing together, I don't mind letting you into a little bit of a secret: but of course you won't let out a word before my old governor—or I'm blowed if he wouldn't keep back half my allowance!"

"Well, Mr. Casey—Casey, I mean——"

"Can't you call me Sylvester right slap out plain at once—and I will call you Launcelot——"

"Well, be it so," said Osborne, who, however, shrank from the coarse familiarity of the miser's son. "This secret of yours, Sylvester?"

"You know Alice Denton——"

"I know her by sight and by name."

"Well," rejoined Sylvester Casey, "betwixt you and me and the post, I'm rather intimate in that quarter. Alice only remains at the circus just by way of a blind—it isn't for the sake of the salary—because the ten guineas a week I allow her——"

"You, Sylvester?" ejaculated Launcelot in astonishment.

"Well, yes—but don't say a word to anybody. Alice is my mistress; and Alice is on most intimate terms with Mademoiselle Imogene—Indeed I fancy that she and a certain Mademoiselle Rose are the only young ladies in the company that Imogen at all associates with; and so I mean to try and get an introduction through Alice. D'ye see, Launcelot—eh? d'ye twig, old fellow—eh?"

"And for what object," Osborne, "do you seek an introduction to Miss Hartland?"

"Come, come, Launcelot!" ejaculated Sylvester; "that's rather too good! Why the deuce does a man about town get introduced to any pretty woman? I like Alice very much—but of course there's no comparison betwixt her and her friend. And then too I'll just tell you what, Osborne," continued Sylvester, with his most impertinent air of self-sufficiency; "it would be rather a fine thing to get hold of Mademoiselle Imogene—something to be talked about—eh? Why, it would make a fellow the object of envy on the part of every soul he met. Not, you know, that I believe in the virtue of Mademoiselle Imogene: because it's generally known she's had a child—but I think since then she has kept herself uncommonly quiet——"

"And do you mean," interrupted Osborne, speaking in an altered and even hoarse voice, "that you meditate making certain overtures to Mademoiselle Imogene?"

"Overtures?" echoed Sylvester, bending upon him a look of surprise: "and why not? You don't think that I've vowed eternal fidelity to Alice? Deuce a bit! Besides, a man may have two mistresses; and since Alice costs me so little——"

"I thought you just now told me that you allowed her ten guineas a week?"

Sylvester coloured up to the very hair of his head; and then endeavouring to turn off his confusion with a laugh, he said, "Well, I forgot that I'd let *that* cat out of the bag. But for heaven's sake don't breathe a syllable before that governor. And now come behind the scenes

and I'll introduce you to Alice.

Launcelot Osborne was on the point of giving a cold refusal, when a quick revulsion of feeling took place within him, and an indescribable impulse in a moment urged him to assent. His temporary hesitation was not therefore noticed by Sylvester; and he said. "I have never been behind the scenes of a theatre: I should like to accompany you."

During the latter portion of this colloquy, Mademoiselle Imogene had disappeared from the circus amidst the enthusiastic plaudits of the spectators; and now the clown was performing some antics to while away a few minutes until the next phase in the equestrian proceedings, should develop itself. Sylvester led Launcelot Osborne behind the scenes, where it was evident that the former was very well known; for he nodded familiarly to everybody and addressed two or three underlings by their Christian names as if to ask them some questions, but in reality to impress Osborne with an idea of his familiar acquaintance with everything and every person behind the scenes and how completely he was at home there.

Launcelot was astonished when he found how completely a close survey disenchant the view in reference to things theatrical. The scenery which had looked beautiful from a distance, now seemed to be a vile daub and a miserable jumbling of colours coarsely and clumsily laid on: men who had presented a very attractive appearance when parading before the curtain, now seemed to be coarse, ugly, vulgar

individuals; and many of the females who had looked exceedingly well—some absolutely beautiful—when seen from a distance, suffered even still more disadvantageously by a close inspection. The rouge seemed plastered instead of artistically applied; eyes that had shone bright from a distance, were now observed to be sunken and hollow: faces that looked attractive, proved to be seared with the small-pox, though the artificial complexion effectually concealed the marks when the countenance was viewed from a distance. As for the costumes, Launcelot was positively amazed when he perceived what a brilliant show the most wretched tinsel could make.

"Ah, now you see the illusion!" exclaimed Sylvester, laughing. "But do you know why those two or three dirty-looking chaps are hanging about you?"

"No. Why?" asked Launcelot.

"Because, as this is the first time you've set your foot behind the scenes, you are expected to stand treat. Give them a crown to get some beer."

Launcelot did as he was desired: and the dirty-looking fellows glided away to procure the refreshment for which the funds were thus liberally furnished. Lancelot kept looking round, his heart palpitating with suspense; for he thought it probable that Imogen might make her appearance, though he felt an insuperable loathing at the idea that she should herd, as it were, amidst the painted, bedizened, tinsel-and-fustian set of beings whom he beheld lounging about.

"Look," whispered Sylvester,

"that short, thick-set, vulgar-looking fellow in the flesh-coloured clothes, is Blundell, the acrobat. He's a precious scamp—I was compelled to put him down a peg or two, because he affected to pay attentions to Alice, and I'm not a fellow to stand any nonsense. Acrobat or no acrobat, it's all the same to me: I would punch his head for him. Ah! look at that sweet pretty girl who has just crossed from the wings on the other side! She is one of the stars—But of course you recognise her. It's Mademoiselle Rose. She looks as well when seen close as on the stage or in the circus. I'll introduce you—But she does not look this way."

"Where did she emerge from?" inquired Launcelot.

"Ah! that door over there leads to the ladies' dressing-room; and that's where Alice no doubt is at this moment with her friend Imogen. I don't think it would be quite the thing for us to walk coolly in; so we must wait a minute or two. Ah! here she is."

At that very moment forth from the ladies' dressing-room came Alice Denton, dressed in the manner which has been noticed in a previous chapter when her portrait was alluded to. She was by no means surprised on beholding Sylvester Casey there for he was frequently in the habit of penetrating behind the scenes but on the other hand nothing could exceed her amazement on recognising in his companion the object of her friend Imogen's devoted love. She started for an instant: but immediately recovering herself, she curtsied gracefully while Sylvester intro-

duced him.

"Alice," said young Casey, "this is my very particular friend the Hon. Launcelot Osborne."

"I have seen Mr. Osborne before," said Alice. "I remember that he was on the same steam-packet some months ago—and I have since noticed him at the theatre——"

"Yes, Miss Denton," said Launcelot hastily; "I occasionally look in for a few minutes——"

"Sylvester," suddenly interjected Alice, "I am dying with thirst! It is most fortunate that you came at this moment. Do go and procure me some ginger-beer, or some sherry-and-water."

For an instant young Casey looked suspicious, as if he thought that Alice Denton was devising an excuse to get rid of him; but his conceit and vanity prevented him from entertaining the idea more than for that single instant; and he set off to comply with the young woman's request.

No sooner was he beyond earshot, than Alice Denton bent a look full of meaning upon Launcelot, at the same time saying, "What has brought you here, Mr. Osborne?"

He coloured—he looked confused for an instant; and then affecting to give a light laugh, he said, "For what other purpose could I come but to see how things look behind the curtain and to be introduced to Miss Denton?"

"No, sir—these were *not* your objects," replied Alice, in a low but emphatic tone. "I know your secret, but it is safe with me! If you really love Imogen,

see her—see her, I conjure you! You know not how you have misjudged her—Oh! you know not!"

"Misjudged her?" echoed Launcelot. "What in the name of heaven——"

"That child——"

"Ah!"—and it was with suspended breath that Osborne prepared to listen.

"Here's some ginger-beer, Alice," said Sylvester, who at that moment re-appeared, having encountered at the stage-door a female who vended the cheap effervescent beverage which he was now about to present to his mistress; for with his wonted thoughtfulness he had calculated that a bottle of the luxury aforesaid would cost precisely threepence, while a glass of sherry-and-water would cause the disbursement of an entire shilling.

Scarcely had Alice touched the tumbler with her lips, when she was required to hasten into the circus; and as Osborne felt assured that Sylvester would stick close to him for all the rest of the evening, and would not afford him any farther opportunity of speaking a word alone to Alice, he thought it inexpedient to remain any longer behind the scenes. Besides, he did not wish to be seen by Imogen, for fear she should think that he was purposely throwing himself in her way; whereas he had not as yet made up his mind how he should act:—he was indeed bewildered by the words which Alice had spoken to him, and utterly at a loss what interpretation to put upon them.

Thus, all things considered, he felt that he required leisure

for reflection and deliberation; and after having waited in front of the curtain to see Imogen appear in a second performance, Launcelot Osborne took his departure,—not without difficulty getting rid of Sylvester, who, as he had foreseen, stuck to him like a leech, proud of being observed in the company of a scion of the aristocracy, and anxious to induce him to go to some supper-rooms and pass the remainder of the evening. But Launcelot peremptorily declined: and eventually shaknig off his unwelcome companion, he returned to Trentham House, to think of Imogen, and ponder on the brief, mysterious, unfinished allusion which had fallen from the lips of Alice Denton.

CHAPTER XV.

LAUNCELOT.

IT was the evening of the day following the performance to which we have just been referring; and Imogen Hartland, apparelled in her fantastic garb, was seated in her neat little parlour, waiting for the moment when she must set off for the theatre. Little Annie was playing with her doll, and singing to it in her sweet infantile voice; while ever and anon Imogen bent a look of tenderness upon the child, or else leant forward and caressed her plump cheek of velvet softness.

Yet Imogen was restless and agitated—for she was balancing, so to speak, betwixt disappointment and suspense. Her friend Alice Denton had told her what

had occurred on the preceding evening; and Imogen had almost made sure that she should that day receive a visit from Launcelot Osborne. But as hour after hour had passed, hope had gradually yielded to disappointment; and while endeavouring to conjure up a thousand excuses to account for Launcelot's non-appearance, she continued a prey to suspense as to whether he might purpose to come to her at all.

She had just been replying to some artless question which little Annie had put to her, when there was a low double knock at the front door. She started, and her heart palpitated violently with the suspense of her feelings; for she knew not whether it might be Launcelot Osborne who was coming, or the Duchess of Ardleigh, this being the evening on which the latter had promised to visit her. She listened with upheaved bosom; she heard Fanny open the door; and then it was a masculine voice that spoke. Oh! how Imogen's heart beat now! Was he indeed coming at last? Should she send the child from the room? No!—she need not be ashamed of its presence; and she allowed the little innocent to remain. A few moments and the door opened, —Launcelot Osborne appearing on the threshold.

His face was pale: he stopped short—he seemed to be labouring under a violent agitation, as if he knew not how to reconcile himself to the step which he was thus taking, and foresaw not what would be its result. Imogen rose up from her seat; and instead of rushing forward to welcome him, as she had ere now

fancied that she should do—insted of being full of a wild haste to proclaim from her lips how cruelly she had been misjudged—she was seized with confusion: she was riveted to the spot—she felt full of shame and bashfulness—and her eyes were bent down, while the colour glowed in richest crimson upon her cheeks.

“Miss Hartland,” said the Hon. Launcelot Osborne, “I ought perhaps to apologize for this intrusion; but still, after everything which took place between us the other day at that strange scene when you received certain avowals and explanations from my lips, I the while taking you for another——”

“Do not apologize for coming hither,” said Imogen, in a low tremulous tone. “It is I who ought to apologize for receiving you in such a garb as this.”

“Though it may not be the garb which I should best like to see you wear,” answered Launcelot, now advancing into the room and closing the door behind him, “yet you need not be ashamed of it; for it indicates that you eat the bread procured by the exercise of a legitimate avocation. But without another syllable of preface let me ask you——”

“I know what you mean,” interrupted Imogen: and then, as a sudden feeling of bitterness and disappointment seized upon her, she said, “But of what avail is it for me to justify myself in your eyes, since you are about to become the husband of her for whom you took me the other day when I sat at your feet—when I pressed your hand to my lips.”

“Imogen,” said Launcelot, in a low voice which was broken and tremulous in its accents; “prove to me that you have been wronged by report—and—and it may make a great difference in my views and intentions—it may prove a turning-point both in my career and yours——”

“Oh, if this were possible!” she murmured, clasping her hands before her: then in a voice that was inaudible to little Annie, but yet powerfully emphatic in its tone, she said, “That child is not mine!”

“Not yours? it really is not yours?”—and Launcelot appeared to reel and stagger under the influence of his feelings, while mingled hope, joy, and suspense were depicted on his countenance.

“No—not mine!” repeated Imogen: “I can look you in the face”—she raised her handsome countenance as she spoke, and met his gaze with her large beautiful blue eyes that appeared to beam with candour and frankness,—“I can look you in the face and declare that as I have a soul to be saved I have never done a deed for which I ought to blush!”

“Good God! is this possible?”—and there was now a sort of wildness in the very joy which filled the look that Launcelot bent upon Imogen. “But why—why have you allowed yourself to remain under imputations so injurious?”

“Yes, so injurious,” said Imogen bitterly, “that even at this very instant you scarcely believe the assurance I have given you.”

“I would give half of my life,” responded Osborne, emphatically

"to be enabled to believe it so thoroughly and completely that it should amount to an absolute conviction."

Imogen rang the bell; Fanny answered the summons; and the actress said, "Take little Annie away for a few minutes."

At the same time she bent down and kissed the child with every evidence of an affection which was indeed little short of being maternal. A doubt shot like a pang through the mind of Launcelot Osborne; and the expression of anguish which it conjured up to his face, was caught by the eye of Imogen ere it flitted away. She understood its meaning; and she said in a low deep voice, which indicated mingled distress and coldness, "You think I am deceiving you? Then why remain another moment with one of whom you must entertain so bad an opinion?"

"Oh, Imogen!" exclaimed Launcelot, with impassioned fervour; "I have told you that I would give half the years which yet remain to me on earth to have the conviction of your innocence so strongly established in my mind that I cannot possibly doubt it! God knows my own inclination is to believe you guiltless!—and when I look in your face I think it impossible that you can be otherwise than pure and stainless! But still—but still—you remember when I met you in the Westminster Road about a month ago—you had then the child with you—it was the first time I had ever seen you with such a companion—it seemed to me as if the burning blush of shame swept over your countenance—"

"Shame only because I instantaneously comprehended the idea which struck you and why you became so deadly pale! Oh, that I had conjured up the courage to address you—or that you had been just and merciful enough to question me without prejudging me!"

"Ah, Imogen," said Launcelot, "I scarcely merit this reproach! so soon as I had recovered from that first shock, I resolved not to suffer my mind to arrive at any hasty conclusion—"

"I understand you," observed Imogen mournfully: "you instituted inquiries in the neighbourhood of my abode—you went from shop to shop—I saw you—and doubtless at each one you heard a repetition of the same calumny. No! I can scarcely call it calumny; for my neighbours believe the tale which they tell—and under existing circumstances they are justified in so believing!"

"But surely, Imogen—surely," interjected Osborne, "you might have found means to convince them of your innocence? And then, too, the other day when you were at Trentham House—surely you could have breathed a single word to proclaim your innocence to me?"

"I was about to breath that word," interrupted Imogen, "when you passionately and wildly broke in upon what I was saying!—you declared that we must part for ever—and you rushed in frenzied haste from the room. Oh, Launcelot! you know not how I have suffered on account of that dear child!—and yet there is not so much as the slightest kinship between her and me. However, it is useless for me to expatiate further upon

the subject——”

“To whom belongs the child?” asked Osborne: “how came it in your keeping? Oh, tell me everything, Imogen!—tell me everything!—for it is my life’s happiness that is now at stake!” “God knows,” she fervidly replied, “I am most anxious to convince you of my innocence. Listen! In this house there used to be a happy family:—that was when I dwelt here with my father, my mother, and my brother. We were poor: but we were all honest and respectable. My parents had seen better days: my mother was a woman of accomplishments, and some of these she imparted to me. It was purposed that I should endeavour to earn my own bread as a nursery-governess at first—afterwards as a governess when I should grow older and more experienced. It was about four years and a half ago—when I was sixteen—that I obtained a situation in the first-mentioned capacity, in a family that was going to travel on the Continent. I was absent for about four or five months, when a sudden circumstance—it was a gross and unpardonable insult which I received—led me all in a moment to quit my situation. I returned at once to London. It was late at night when I reached the paternal home,—this very house which I now occupy. That same night a child, two or three weeks old, was brought hither, my parents having agreed to receive and adopt it in consideration of a handsome sum of money that was furnished for the purpose. Now, observe, Launcelot! On the very night that I returned was the child brought hither: and as

my parents had not previously breathed a syllable, not even to any intimate friend, of the bargain which they had made and of their expectation of receiving the little stranger, the coincidence was altogether a most unfortunate one for me.”

“Proceed, Imogen—proceed,” said Osborne, watching her countenance with the most earnest interest.

“Nevertheless,” she continued, “it did not strike my parents that the coincidence might become the source of evil rumours; while such a thought assuredly did not occur to me. My own imagination was too pure and innocent for the entertainment of such apprehensions. My parents had obtained a considerable sum of money as a reward for adopting the child, and likewise to become a provision for little Annie’s future benefit; and thus poverty being no longer a guest in the house, my mother resolved that I should not be again exposed to such insult, amounting almost to outrage, as that which had induced me to abandon my situation all in a moment. I therefore remained at home. I grew passionately fond of little Annie; I reared her by hand—and the child got to love me so devotedly that it would let no one else do anything for it I pitied its worse than orphan condition—abandoned, repudiated, rejected by its parents as it was; and that feeling of commiseration, mingling with the love that I bore for little Annie, strengthened the attachment itself and made my heart yearn towards the innocent as if she were veritably my own child. And it is

for this that I have suffered!—for this that I at length became aware that calumnious whippers circulated concerning me!—for this that I had to endure the jeering smile or contemptuous toss of the head on the part of a neighbour when I attempted to say something to efface the injurious opinion which was thus spreading concerning me! Misfortunes were at the same time coming upon the family. My father—who in the former part of his life had impoverished himself by his mania for speculation—no sooner got possession of the money which he received on little Annie's account, than he launched out into fresh ventures. These, alas! turned out to be as unfortunate as the former ones; and all that money was lost. Then came pestilence, ravaging this neighbourhood. You recollect perhaps that two years ago a virulent fever broke out through the district of Lambeth? My father and mother died within the same week; and then poverty entered the house. My brother went to sea—I obtained an engagement at Astley's—and now you know everything."

"Oh, if the conviction were only established in my mind," exclaimed Launcelot,—"you know to what I allude, Imogen!—then, Oh! *then* how deeply should I sympathize with you!"

"Perhaps, I may be enabled to establish this conviction," murmured Imogen, trembling almost like a guilty person at an idea which she had previously conceived, and which was now rapidly expanding in her mind.

"For God's sake do so! Oh, do so, Imogen! I conjure you!"

exclaimed Osborne: and seizing her hands, he pressed them both in his own. "Yes—by every thing sacred I adjure you to prove to me your complete innocence! I already believe you, Imogen—dear Imogen!—but Oh! for your own sake you will satisfy me so fully that never hereafter shall there be a moment when even the slightest misgiving may enter my mind—no cloud to flit across the heaven of that happiness which we may perhaps enjoy together!"

"Oh," murmured Miss Hartland reclining her head upon the shoulder of that handsome patrician, as he held her hands clasped in his own; I would make any sacrifice to prove myself worthy of your love! Yes, I would be guilty of any treachery—any perfidy, no matter how vile!"

"Good heavens! what mean you, Imogen?" cried Osborne, starting back and gazing upon her with consternation.

"It means," she replied, "that I have a right to vindicate my own character, even though by so doing I may ruin that of another!"

"Ah! then your parents, when they agreed to adopt that child and received a sum of money as a reward, were acquainted with the infant's parentage?"

"No," replied Imogen: "they died in ignorance of the truth. The whole affair at the outset was negotiated with my parents so warily, and the child was delivered into my mother's arms under such circumstances of extreme precaution, that no clue was left for the slightest scintillation of a discovery!"

"Ah!" said Launcelot: and

a shade of doubt once more crossed his features.

"Again mistrustful!" said Imogen, in a tone of gentle reproach; "and you judge me even before I have well finished speaking! Exactly a fortnight has elapsed since I discovered the parentage of that child, at least so far as the mother is concerned; for she called her—doubtless her heart yearned to see the offspring whom for upwards of four years she had ignored and abandoned—and so she came——"

"Therefore you know her?" said Launcelot eagerly. "Oh! think not that I am inspired by any ungenerous or impertinent curiosity; but it is for your sake Imogen—yes, and for the sake of my own happiness——"

"I believe you, Launcelot! I believe you! Yes—I know who the mother is."

"Oh! then you can satisfy me——"

"Hush!" said Imogen, as her ear caught a low double knock at the front door.

"You expect a visitor?" said Launcelot inquiringly.

"Yes," quickly responded Miss Hartland in a whisper "and you shall overhear every syllable that takes place between that visitor and myself. But I charge you not let it be known that you are a listener! This way! this way!"

She hurried him into an adjoining room; she placed the door ajar; and then she glided back into the front parlour, where she awaited the visitress whom she had been expecting. Fanny ushered in a lady dressed with the utmost plainness, and with a black veil so folded over her

countenance that it was impossible to catch the slightest glimpse of her features. Fanny withdrew: and the young Duchess sank down upon a seat, overpowered by her emotions.

"I have kept the appointment, Miss Hartland, she at length said: "but, Oh! it is so very difficult for me to take such a step as this and escape observation!"

"No doubt, my lady," observed Imogen.

"Hush! for heaven's sake give me no titles!" interjected the Duchess. "I tremble from head to foot—and if I were not sure that I could thoroughly trust to you——"

"Shall I go and fetch your child, madam, that you may press the innocent to your bosom?"

"No, no, Miss Hartland!—not now! not now! I am not equal to such a task——"

"A task?" echoed Imogen. "What! to embrace your own offspring?"

"Ah! you cannot comprehend the dreadful feelings which I now experience," said the Duchess, with a concentrated emphasis that corresponded well with the sense of the words themselves. "The other day my heart yearned towards my child—it was an irresistible impulse that I obeyed when I came hither—and yet the step was taken with fear and trembling, and with a strong shuddering. Do you not know the sensation of looking from a dizzy height and longing to plunge down into the abyss? Well then, it was that fearful sort of feeling which impelled me to come hither?"

"And you expected not," said

Imogen, "to meet an actress in her fantastic garb—and you were shocked and you repented the step you had taken—and you would have retreated—you would have fled—yes, without embracing your child! But I was alike indignant and shocked at the heartlessness of your conduct—I tore the veil from your countenance—and behold, it was the Duchess of Ardleigh who stood before me!"

"Hush! hush!" exclaimed the brilliant lady, convulsed from head to foot with fear. "Why do you thus breathe my name? why do you thus endanger me? Is it that you seek to compromise me?"

"No," replied Imogen: "but I am endeavouring to move your heart by some means, if I can. Shall I fetch down the child?"

"No, no!" almost shrieked forth the Duchess, with a convulsing anguish. "I loathe and hate the infant, to me the cause of so much unhappiness! It was not in the weakness of love that I surrendered to the father of that child: it was as a victim that I succumbed to the treachery of a ravisher! Now then, will you ask me to love that child? No, no! you could not! It were against nature itself to do so! I could not have been in my right mind when I came the other evening to see the child! No, no! I was mad—as indeed I often think I am on other points as well as on this!"

The Duchess had spoken with an exceeding vehemence;—and now she gasped for breathe and—doubtless feeling the air oppressive, she raised her veil. Imogen contemplated her with earnestness; for she did indeed fear

that the patrician lady was going mad, and that she would burst forth in some still more violent paroxysms of emotion.

There was a pause of nearly a minute; and then Imogen said, "I feel that I was wrong to persist in urging your child upon your notice. There was a compact made with my parents—and that bargain ought to be honourably fulfilled. Neither can I forget that a complete pecuniary provision was made for the child, and that the sum thus furnished was dissipated by my father. Madam, I will urge nothing more upon you—neither will I molest you further. You shall henceforth hear naught of Imogen Hartland; and you may rest assured that whether you hate or love dear little Annie she shall always find a true friend—aye, a mother in me."

"Miss Hartland," said the Duchess, in a voice that was now low and tremulous, "you are speaking in the most generous manner! Your conduct is altogether so admirable——"

"No, no!" interrupted Imogen hastily: "do not address me thus! I have been wrong to persecute you even for a moment. If ever you wish to hear of your child, you may seek me for that purpose: but otherwise you will see me no more."

The Duchess gazed upon the actress with a look which was as much as to say, "Singular and unaccountable being that you are!"—then rising from her seat she drew forth her purse, which was heavy with gold and with bank-notes; and proffering that purse, she observed, "Here are at housand pounds for your use."

"No, madam!—no!" exclaimed

Imogen emphatically. "You provided well for the child at the outset; and it is for me to act precisely as if my poor father had not by his speculations lost the amount that you thus furnished. Ah! I said that you should hear from me no more! But in case that I am unable to earn bread for that dear child, then most assuredly would I appeal unto your bounty—but not till then!"

The Duchess again pressed the money upon Imogen; but it was still refused firmly though respectfully; and then the patrician lady, lowering her veil said, "Farewell, miss Hartland, Never never can I forget the generosity of your conduct!"

She pressed Imogen's hand and hastened from the room. She opened the front door for herself, and issued forth, at once closing that door behind her. She had not proceeded a dozen yards along the street—the dusk having now closed in—when she was suddenly caught round the waist by the strong arms of a man, and in the twinkling of an eye lifted into a cab, which was drawn close up against the kerbstone, and the door of which was standing open. The man sprang in after her, closing the door; and the vehicle rolled away at a rapid pace.

Meanwhile Imogen Hartland, the instant the Duchess took her departure, sank down upon the sofa; and covering her face with her hands, burst into a convulsive fit of sobbing and weeping. Launcelot Osborne was almost immediately by her side; and then he threw himself at her feet.

"Imogen, Imogen!" he said, forcing her hands away from

her countenance and pressing them to his lips; "for heaven's sake tranquillize yourself! What is the matter? Speak to me, dearest, dearest Imogen!"

"Oh! now I know," she murmured, her voice broken with those convulsing sobs, "you will hate me! The very means which I have adopted to make you love me, will cause you to detest me!"

"No, no, Imogen! no no dearest!" cried Launcelot. "I swear that I love you more than life! Oh, heaven only knows how much I love you!"

"But this dreadful act of treachery which I have committed towards that unfortunate woman——"

"I forced you to do it—and you were justified under the circumstances!"

"Oh! if you think so!"—and with a cry of joy Imogen threw herself into his arms; and the lovers were locked in a fervid embrace.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FIRS.

NOTHING could exceed the excitement which prevailed in the usually quiet little village of Southdale, when the postchaise which had been hired to convey Ethel and her maid to Dorchester, returned to the inn, the postillion and constable bearing the intelligence of the rescue which had been effected. Of course the postboy, having received the five-pound note from Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn to enter into the plot, told his tale in such a way as com-

pletely to screen those two worthies from all suspicion. He declared that he obtained a perfect view of the two men who knocked him off his horse and he gave such a description as quite separated their persons from the remotest idea of identifying them with the strangers who had hired the phaeton. He represented them as two men of herculean size and colossal strength; whereas Gaffney was of moderate stature, and Peppercorn was a dapper little fellow, thin, wiry, and active. The constable Gibson, willing enough to snatch at any apology for suffering himself to be overpowered so easily corroborated the postboy's tale, though in point of fact he had not obtained so much as the slightest glimpse of the two men; for he was dozing at the time when the vehicle was stopped, and scarcely had his eyes opened from his snooze than they were closed again by the stunning effect of the blow which stretched him in the road as he was dragged out of the chaise. Thus not for a single instant did suspicion attach itself to the real authors of the occurrence.

On the following day Messrs. Gaffney and Peppercorn, with cigars in their mouths, and their hats perched jauntily on one side, drove up to the inn, and alighted from the phaeton. They instantaneously ordered glasses of ale; and with a knowing wink, gave the landlord to understand that they had won no end of money by the prize-fight, which they said had come off at a very early hour that morning. They seemed to be perfectly astounded when the

unsophisticated Mr. Goodman told them of the rescue of Mrs. Trevor; and when they heard the personal description of the two villains, according to the representation of the postboy, they both suddenly recollected that they had met two such fellows along the road, and were rather alarmed at the time for their own safety. Thus everything considered, Mr. Goodman was perfectly convinced that his two sporting-looking customers had no more concern than he himself had with the particular affair that was now exciting so strong a sensation in Southdale.

But Mr. Trevor—otherwise the Duke of Ardleigh—did not pass equally free from the taint of suspicion until the prompt institution of an inquiry resulted in the clearing of his character also on this special point. Another local constable, a trifle more astute than Gibson, was sent off very early in the morning to Dorchester to find the postillion who had driven the so-called Mr. Trevor from Southdale. But the postillion was fully prepared for any questions that might be put to him, inasmuch as he had the Duke's twenty guineas in his pocket and his Grace's threat of transportation before his eyes. He therefore vowed that he had seen nothing of the lady or her servant—that he had driven Mr. Trevor to the door of the coach-office, where that gentleman had alighted—and that there was an end of the business. The constable returned with this information to Southdale, which pleasant little village was accordingly more mystified and bewildered than ever it had been since its name first appeared in

Doomsday Book, where the archæologists of the place declared that it was to be duly found.

Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn spent the greater part of the day at the inn, where they feasted upon the best which the house could furnish, and finally paid their bill with such liberality that Goodman, the worthy landlord, almost regretted he had not begged to be permitted to stake a little money on the prize-fight under their auspices, that he might have reaped proportionate gains. Thus firmly believing in the fiction of that prize-fight, he continued unsuspecting that his two liberal customers were of a character at all different from what they represented themselves to be. They took their departure at about five o'clock in the evening, by a coach which passed through the village; and the landlord regretted the loss of such good customers. These two individuals alighted from the coach at a neighbouring hamlet; and when it was dusk, they began to retrace their way—or at least to return by a circuitous route through the woods and fields, into the neighbourhood of Southdale.

But taking leave of Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn for the present, let us proceed to introduce the reader somewhat more intimately to Squire Ponsford and his daughter than we have yet done. We have already stated that Mr. Ponsford was about sixty years of age, of very gentlemanly appearance, with a pale and severe expression of countenance. In respect to his daughter, we merely alluded to her as a beautiful girl of about

eighteen: but we should not be in error if we were to add that a more lovely creature than Pamela Ponsford was not to be seen throughout Dorsetshire. She was short and slightly formed, of the most exquisite symmetry, and with an aerial fairy-like appearance. Her complexion was dazzlingly fair and transparent, the most delicate hues of the carnation softly blending with the pure whiteness of the lily. Her hair was of a very light chestnut: and it showered in myriads of ringlets upon her shoulders. Her eyes were of violet-blue, and replete with the most amiable expression. Nothing could exceed the beauty of the classically cut lips nor the purity and regularity of the rows of pearly-teeth. Though she had numbered eighteen years, yet there was something of girlish artlessness about her—something even of girlish gaiety and innocence—as if she were completely unacquainted with the cares of the world and had never experienced anything to impair the equanimity of her thoughts.

Pamela had lost her mother when she was in her infancy; and thus having never known a maternal parent's care, she had not been doomed to sorrow for its absence. She had been reared under the care of trustworthy and competent governesses; and thus she had never incurred the risk of acquiring the taint which the minds of young girls are sometimes too apt to derive from the atmosphere of boarding-schools. In short, she had been carefully but tenderly and indulgently brought up; she was good and she was beautiful—accomplished and well mannered—bashful and

retiring before strangers, but affable and of a charming good nature amongst friends and acquaintances.

Squire Ponsford had no near relations of either sex; and thus there were no kinswomen to dwell beneath the same roof and become guides or companions for Pamela. The governesses who reared her, had supplied the place of the mother whom she had lost in her infancy: but these ladies had gone to settle elsewhere when their services were no longer required; and thus Pamela now resided alone with her father at the Firs. She however frequently had some of the young ladies of the neighbourhood to stay with her—the Squire gave frequent evening parties on his daughter's account (for he himself secretly detested them); and thus Pamela was never dull at that secluded country seat, nor did the time ever hang heavy upon her hands.

Squire Ponsford was reputed to be very well off: he had a good estate—and it was believed that he had a considerable sum of money in the funds. Pamela was his only child; and she was looked upon as an heiress. Thus, beautiful and accomplished as she was, and with the prospect of inheriting a fine fortune, she naturally became the object of attention on the part of several of the scions of the principal families in the county; but she never seemed to understand their attentions—it never appeared as if she noticed that one young gentleman was more assiduous to her than another; and thus no one received any encouragement to attach himself deliberately and studiously to her as a suitor. She

was not volatile—much less was she a flirt or a coquette: but she seemed to receive with the same good-tempered affability the attentions of all who approached her, just as readly giving her hand for a quadrille to one as to another, and appearing to be completely indifferent whose arm she took when being escorted from the drawing-room to the dining-room, or who became her cavalier at a picnic or rural excursion. In short, at eighteen Miss Ponsford was still completely unacquainted with the sentiment of love; and everyone marvelled who the happy individual would be that was destined to win her heart and lead her to the altar.

Before we continue the thread of our narrative, we must place on record a few particulars relative to the estate possessed by Squire Ponsford. This was double the size of the domain which he had inherited from his father. At that time—looking back for a period of about five-and-twenty years—the estate called “The Firs,” the property of the Ponsford family, was joined by another property called “The Southdale Farm.” This belonged to a young man of the name of Pringle: he was a wild reckless fellow, who thought more of hunting and shooting over his lands than attending to their culture, and who kept open house with a hospitality that could not fail to be ruinous. John Ponsford—at that time unmarried—was very intimate with Ruper Pringle: but there was a difference of ten years in their ages, and Squire Ponsford was proportionately more experienced in the world than his friend

Pringle. The consequence was that while the former carefully lived within his income, though enjoying himself with all kinds of pleasures, the latter was soon floundering in a maze of pecuniary difficulties; so that he fell into the hands of usurers and money-lenders. Then there arose a sudden breach between John Ponsford and Rupert Pringle. No one knew the exact cause of the quarrel, though it was whispered that some female was at the bottom of it: but certain it is that the animosity which ensued between those two was even greater than their former intimacy had been. And then in a very short time Rupert Pringle's affairs came to a crisis—Southdale Farm was seized by the money-lenders to whom it was mortgaged—and Pringle himself suddenly disappeared. There was a good deal of mystery attending these proceedings at the time; and indeed no one seemed to understand the exact rights of the matter; for it seemed strange that Pringle should vanish so abruptly after having surrendered up everything to his creditors, and without even waiting to see whether the sale of his property would not suffice for the liquidation of his debts and leave some little surplus for his own benefit. And then too, to render the mystery still deeper, and to afford additional scope for surprise and conjecture, who should become the purchaser of Southdale Farm but Squire Ponsford himself?—not openly and at public auction but quietly, if not secretly, by private contract with the creditors who had taken possession of it! And thus the Pringle property became incorporated with

that of the Ponsfords; the distinctive appellation of "Southdale Farm" soon ceased to exist—and the amalgamated whole was known under the general title of "The Firs." As for Pringle, it seemed that he was never again heard of: indeed his fate remained enveloped in the utmost mystery,—some persons maintaining that he fled to another part of the country or else to a foreign clime—other people confidently expressing their opinion that he had committed suicide at the time of his irretrievable difficulties, and that his corpse had fed the fishes in some adjacent river. There were likewise at the time certain whispers to the effect that Ponsford had dealt harshly and unfairly towards his late friend: but no direct accusation was levelled against the Squire. On the other hand, it is only fair to state that there were persons who were fully convinced that the origin of the quarrel was entirely attributable so some nefarious conduct on Rupert Pringle's own part, and that in respect to the purchase of the Southdale Farm the Squire had only availed himself of a legitimate opportunity to increase his own domain in a suitable and honourable manner.

Now, as we have before said, a quarter of a century had elapsed since those occurrences, the details of which were therefore only dimly remembered in the neighbourhood, while Squire Ponsford himself had completely outlived any evil opinion or prejudice that might possibly have existed concerning him among the Pringle partisans at that date when the events themselves took place. As for Pamela, she had scarcely ever heard of

the matter at all,—her entire knowledge thereof being confined to the fact that a portion of her father's present estate had not always existed in the family, but had been purchased from a spend-thrift of the name of Pringle some years before she herself was born.

We now resume the thread of our story. It was the evening—the dusk had closed in—the lamp was lighted in the parlour—and Squire Ponsford sat with his daughter, discoursing on the mysterious rescue of Mr. Trevor.

"I must say, dear father," observed Pamela, raising her frank beautiful countenance and looking him with smiling ingenuousness in the face as she let her embroidery fall in her lap,—I must say that I am not sorry "the poor lady is saved from the horrors of a prison; although it was of course very wrong for her to tear the register. But still if her brain be affected——"

"Of which there is little doubt," interjected Mr. Ponsford. "You remember her—do you not?"

"Oh, certainly! when she was Miss Fraser, and lived in the ivy cottage. But I never knew her to speak to," continued Pamela. "How was it, dear father, that she did not visit at the Firs?"

"It was not my fault," answered the Squire. "Her widowed mother led a very retired life in that cottage, courting no society, and visiting only Mr. and Mrs. Milner. When she died, several families showed the kindest attention towards her orphan daughter Ethel—and I was often thinking that we would call upon her, but something always occurred to prevent it; and then Mr. Trevor

came into the neighbourhood, married her, and took her away."

"Poor creature!" said Pamela with a sigh of compassion. "I wonder how it is that her brain has become affected? But I suppose, dear father, that you will do nothing more against her?"

"Well, I think not," replied Mr. Ponsford. "I did my duty as a magistrate but I am not sorry that the case has ended thus. At the same time it is a very hard thing for those whose marriage-registries are destroyed by the act of this unfortunate woman."

"I thought I once heard Mr. Milner say," remarked Pamela, "that duplicate copies of the parish registers are kept?"

"Yes—at the diocesan courts" rejoined Mr. Ponsford: "but the books are only sent every two years to have copies taken of the entries that may be made during that time; and as all the entries upon the leaf which Mr. Trevor tore out, happen to be within the two years, there are no duplicates and the records are lost."

"And what will those persons do," inquired Pamela, "who may possibly some day stand in need of their marriage-certificates?"

"I scarcely know what they can do," responded her father: "but it is of course very awkward. For instance, there is George White, the farmer's son, who meant to apply to me for the situation of bailiff: but he is now unable to complete his testimonials——"

"But every one knows," observed Pamela, "that Mr. George White was married about eighteen months or two years

ago."

"Very likely, my dear," said Mr. Ponsford: "but in these cases I hold to the very letter of the usual formality. My father and grandfather and great grandfather did the same—and I assuredly shall not deviate from the rule."

"Then George White will not obtain the situation?" said Pamela.

"Unfortunately for him he will not. I am very sorry—but there are certain hereditary customs which ought to be preserved in families as religiously as if they were heirlooms——"

The Squire's sententious speech was interrupted by the entrance of a livery-servant, who said, "If you please, sir, here is a person come to apply for the situation of bailiff."

"Why, this is rather an unreasonable hour—nine o'clock in the evening," observed Mr. Ponsford, drawing himself up and looking severely as he glanced at the time-piece on the mantel.

"He says, sir, that he only got down to the village just now: and thinking that there might be a great many applicants for the situation, he hoped you would look over his testimonials sir——"

"Well, let him step in here," said the Squire; "for after all," he added, as the domestic withdrew, "it is a cautious business-like proceeding on this applicant's part, and speaks well for his character."

Pamela took up her embroidery, and only just slightly glanced at the door as it opened to give admittance to the applicant for the vacant situation.

"Where do you come from?" inquired Mr. Ponsford.

"I come from Hampshire, sir, answered the applicant in a voice so pleasing that Pamela could not help noticing it; and she now glanced again towards the individual.

She observed that he was a young man, a little above the middle stature, very neatly dressed; and though it was a matter on which she ordinarily felt perfectly indifferent, yet she could not help hoping that so respectable-looking a person might obtain the coveted post.

"Why, you are young," said the Squire, "to seek for such a situation. How old are you?"

"I am twenty-five, sir," was the response, "although perhaps I may not seem to be quite so old."

"And your testimonials?"

"They are here, sir:—with which words the applicant advanced towards the table, on which he laid a small packet of papers, at the same time making a respectful bow.

"Your name, I perceive, is Stephen Ashborne," said Mr. Ponsford; "and you have already filled the situation of bailiff to Sir Norton Bridgeman?"

"Yes, sir. I think you will find Sir Norton's testimonials satisfactory."

"Yes—I don't know but that it is very satisfactory. I see that Sir Norton says you have merely left his service because he has no further use for you. What does that mean?"

"It means, sir," replied Stephen Ashborne, "that Sir Norton is going abroad immediately in consequence of the encumbered state of his affairs."

"Ah! I heard something of the sort the other day," said Squire Ponsford, when I was at Southampton. It was quite by accident—I think my information was derived from hearing two gentlemen speaking on the subject in the coffee-room of the hotel—and they said Sir Norton was going all to pieces.

"I am afraid, sir," replied Ashborne, "that the poor gentleman will never get over his difficulties. He was an excellent master—and I am profoundly sorry for him. You will see, sir, from those testimonials that I have served him well and faithfully. I saw your advertisement in a Dorsetshire paper, and I lost no time in coming to present my testimonials for your inspection."

There was something frank almost amounting to independence in Stephen Ashborne's manner; and yet it was courteous and respectful. But there was nothing servile or cringing in it. It was as much as to say, "There are my testimonials—take me if you like; but if not, I know that with such certificates as those I shall not be long in obtaining such a situation as I require."

But it was precisely because Stephen Ashborne seemed thus frankly confident and ingenuously self-reliant, amounting as we have said almost to a spirit of independence, that squire Ponsford thought it necessary to assume a high ground. He therefore said, "Well, my good man, I will think over the matter. You can call to-morrow at noon, and I will give you my answer."

"I beg your pardon, sir," responded Ashborne; "but I have copied half a dozen adver-

tisements from gentlemen requiring bailiffs in this and the neighbouring counties: and if I have not the honour to please one off-hand, I may succeed in giving satisfaction to another, I cannot afford to let the grass grow under my feet."

"But I cannot give you an answer all in a moment," said the Squire, somewhat angrily.

"I thank you for your courtesy sir, in receiving me at this hour," said Stephen, with the most perfect goodtempered frankness and with unabating respectfulness: and gathering up his papers he was about to retire, with a polite "Good evening, sir. Good evening, miss."

"Stop!" said Mr. Ponsford, who was determined not to let slip through his hands an individual who was so excellently recommended. "I like this anxiety on your part to obtain a situation without delay, perhaps you are married?"

"No, sir—I am single: but I do not want to remain idle on that account; the truth is, I am almost certain of obtaining the bailiff's place at Hazledon Park: but I thought that if I should be fortunate enough to please you, sir, I would rather stop short at the Firs than go on any farther."

"Then you are at once prepared to enter on your duties, provided I agree to take you?"

"At once, sir. My trunk is at the inn, and I await your commands."

Pamela felt pleased that an individual who seemed to be of so frank, honest, and straightforward a character, stood a chance of obtaining the vacant situation; and she again raised her eyes for a moment from her work to

glance towards him. He was not tall, but there was something in the mainly symmetry of the figure, the full development of the chest and shoulders, and the well-knit limbs, which appeared to give height to his stature; while there was a veritable gentility if not actual gracefulness in the careless ease of the attitude in which he stood near the door, awaiting the Squire's decision. His countenance was handsome—of a bold striking masculine beauty—open and honest in its expression. The hair, of rather a light brown, curled around the fine contour of the head and waved in a luxuriant mass above a high noble brow; the large blue eyes were clear, and seemed as if they were enabled by the conscience of their owner to look the whole world proudly in the face: the nose was slightly aquiline: the mouth, a trifle too large for the hyper-critical perfection of that face, expressed good-nature, determination, and a proper manly pride. There was nothing coarse in the lips, though they were thus somewhat largely chiselled: and when parting, they revealed two rows of magnificent teeth as white as ivory. And yet, above all this young man's appearance of independence, self-reliance, and open-heartedness, there was a certain polish subduing the boldness of the general effect—an unstudied courtesy and a becoming respectfulness.

A little more conversation took place between the Squire and Stephen Ashborne, in respect to pecuniary terms and other details; and the bargain was concluded.

"You can either sleep at the inn," said the Squire, "or you can have your luggage brought up to the house and pass the night here, if you think fit. In this case, you can be introduced to the possession of the bailiff's cottage; the first thing in the morning."

As Stephen Ashborne thought the latter was the plan which the Squire preferred, he said, "I thank you, sir—and I will take up my quarters here for the night, so that I shall be ready to enter on my duties the very first thing in the morning."

The newly appointed bailiff then withdrew; and as the door closed behind him, Mr. Ponsford said, "I like the appearance of that man very much: and if he is not too forward in his manner, and too full of what the common people call a spirit of their own, he will doubtless suit very well."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SQUIRE'S BED-CHAMBER.

IT was midnight, when two figures with smock frocks—or rather long loose gaberdines, concealing their other clothes, made their way stealthily and cautiously through the wood adjoining Squire Ponsford's park. Every now and then they paused to listen—or when they drew near the outskirt of the wood, they peeped forth; and thus from time to time assuring themselves that the coast was clear, they continued their route.

"Hark!" presently said Jack Peppercorn; "isn't that a footstep?"

Tim Gaffney fancied he likewise heard a step; he listened—all seemed to be still; but not being quite certain on the point, he lay down flat upon the ground applied his ear to the earth, and held his breath as long as he was able.

"It's all right, Jack," he at length said, rising up to his feet again."

They entered the park. The moon was now shining brightly, and they were therefore compelled to proceed circuitously in order to keep entirely within the shade of the trees. They soon drew near the mansion itself; and Tim Gaffney, pointing to two particular windows on the ground floor, said, "that's where the library is."

The plans of the two men were evidently preconcerted and arranged to the veriest details; for they lost not a moment in commencing operations. There were shutters inside the room; and the window itself was fastened. Gaffney drew forth a glazier's diamond, and made a semicircular cut on the pane through which it was necessary to effect an opening. The piece was removed in a skilful and noiseless manner: the bolt of the fastening was then easily pressed back—and the lower sash of the window was slowly raised.

It now required but three or four pressures of the hand against the shutters to show the burglars exactly where the iron bar stretched across inside; and the blade of a clasp-knife was introduced in the chink formed by two of the folds of the shutter. A peculiar upward jerk lifted the bar from its spring-socket; and in a few moments the shutter was

opened. Gaffney and Peppercorn entered: they then shut down the window and closed the shutter again, so that if any one should happen to pass by outside there might be nothing to excite suspicion.

The burglars, having put on black masks, and satisfied themselves that their pistols were convenient to be clutched in case of need, opened the library door and peeped into the hall, whether the beams of the moonlight were penetrating. All was silent; and they now took off their boots, which they secured in the large pockets of their gaberdines. Noiselessly they began the ascent of the staircase: they reached the first landing—and here they paused.

They had made a careful survey of the premises on the preceding evening, when following Ethel thither on the occasion of her arrest. There was an array of five windows in front; and as they were precisely uniform, Gaffney had calculated that they probably belonged to the principal drawing-room, or else that if only the three middle windows pertained to that apartment, the remaining ones must belong respectively to bedrooms. If so, those would assuredly be the chief chambers of the mansion. Now therefore, on reaching the landing, Gaffney noiselessly opened one leaf of an immense pair of folding-doors which appeared facing the staircase: he peeped in—and he counted five windows in the drawingroom. There were consequently no bed-rooms on that landing, in the front part of the house. But on each side there were doors; and there were long

passages branching off, leading into the wings. These doors must belong to the principal bed-chambers. Such was the conviction which struck Gaffney immediately after he had surveyed the interior of the drawing-room.

With the utmost caution he tried the handle of the door on the right hand: it yielded; and having opened the door to the extent of hardly an inch, the foremost burglar listened. In less than a minute he closed the door as gently as he had opened it:—he had ascertained that the room was occupied, but he could tell by the breathing that it was that of a female, or at least of some young person. He now approached the opposite door—namely, that on the left-hand side; and he soon found that it was locked. Applying his ear to the key-hole, he listened with suspended breath; and at the expiration of about a minute he made significant sign to his companion, as much as to imply that this room was likewise occupied, but that its tenant was a man.

The moon, shining brightly through the staircase window, aided the operations of the burglars. Gaffney now drew forth a small bottle of oil: he poured some upon a little piece of sponge, by means of which he ejected that oil into the lock—thus lubricating all its wards. He then took from beneath his gaberdine a peculiar kind of instrument made of very strong wire, and consisting partly of a pair of pincers and partly of a skeleton key. This he introduced into the lock in such a way that it seized upon the key that was already there: it gripped it fast—it turned it—not the slightest

sound was heard—and the door was unlocked. Then, having withdrawn the skeleton key, Gaffney again listened for upwards of a minute; and still the deep regular breathing which came from within the chamber assured him that it was a man who occupied it and that he continued to sleep. He also ascertained that a light was burning in the room.

Gaffney now made a sign to Jack Peppercorn, who furnished himself with a pistol in one hand and a claspknife in the other. As for Gaffney himself, he merely took out his handkerchief, which he rolled in a peculiar manner to serve a special purpose. He then noiselessly opened the door: a lamp was burning on the toilet-table—its beams revealed the countenance of the sleeper—and this was Squire Ponsford. It was profoundly that he slept: the burglars entered silently with their shoeless feet; and while Gaffney paused an instant to close the door, Jack Peppercorn glided up to the bed, where the ghastly blade of his claspknife was at once placed within half an inch of Ponsford's throat. The next moment Gaffney joined his companion there: he leant over the couch—he applied his folded kerchief to the Squire's mouth—he then touched him on the shoulder—and as he opened his eyes with a sudden start, Tim Gaffney, half-dexterously, half-forcibly, drove the kerchief completely in between his teeth thus gagging him at once. At the same instant Jack Peppercorn laid the cold blade of the knife flat upon the Squire's throat: and Gaffney said in a quick low voice, "Be quiet, or

you are a dead man !"

Squire Ponsford was broad awake in a moment, and at the same instant smitten with the hideous consciousness of his position, gagged and powerless in the hands of two ruffians with black masks and white gaberdi-ness. He was a man of nerve and courage : but to be startled up from one's sleep to such a state of things as this was sufficient to daunt the bravest and to paralyse the energies of the most self-possessed.

"Now I tell you what it is, sir," said Tim Gaffney, at once, "we don't want your life—we don't want to rob you. We will explain our business in due course : but in the first place it will be as well to let you know that we feel we are doing a desperate thing—and so if you try to give any alarm or make a disturbance, you'll be the sufferer."

"This here is a knife," said Jack Peppercorn, making the back of the blade indent itself somewhat into the Squire's neck—a process whereat a hideous cold shudder passed through his entire frame ; "and this here is a pistol, the butt-end of which would do your work in a jiffey if so be the knife should happen to fail."

"Now look you," said Gaffney, "if you mean to take your salvation oath to hold your tongue and not cry out, just lift up your right hand as a sign, and then I'll take the gag from your mouth. But if so be you won't agree to no civil terms, then lay still and we shall know what to do."

The Squire raised his right hand ; and Gaffney at once with

drew the folded kerchief from between his teeth ; but at the same instant the horrid cold steel again pressed upon his throat, and the butt-end of the pistol was tapped against his temple.

"Wait a moment," said Tim Gaffney, "and hold on, mate !"

With these words he drew forth his own clasp-knife ; and mounting a chair, cut down the bell-pull which was by the side of the couch.

"For God's sake what do you require of me ?" asked Ponsford. "You have declared that you do not want my life ? I beseech you to relieve me from suspense !"

"All in good time," responded Tim Gaffney, now seating himself on one side of the bed, while Jack Peppercorn was performing the part of sentinel on the other with his poniard-like knife and his pistol.

"Stand away from me," said the Squire ; "stand away from me, I entreat !—and I swear that I will not cry out !"

"We'd rayther not trust you," said Jack Peppercorn : "there's nothing like the precaution a cold blade and a pistol's butt-end."

Ponsford could scarcely repress a groan, as he said, "Be quick then, and tell me what you require of me, I beseech you !"

"Do'nt be in a hurry," replied Tim Gaffney ; "but lay quite at your ease while I discourse to you a bit. It's a matter of twenty-five years ago that a certain Rupert Pringle left this country through fear of you."

"Ah !" said Ponsford, electrified by an allusion to a matter the revival of which so utterly unexpected.

"Not too loud !" said Jack Peppercorn ; and again the cold

blade was ominously pressed against the magistrate's throat. "Who are you?" he asked, looking up earnestly at Tim Gaffney's masked countenance. "You cannot be——"

"No, no" I'm not Pringle: that's sure and sartin enough! But don't talk except to answer my questions. Upwards of twenty five years ago you and Pringle was intimate. Pringle got into difficulties—he wanted money—he was ashamed to tell you of his needs—but in his desperation he forged your name to a bill, which he got discounted at the Dorchester Bank. Wasn't that true?"

"Perfectly true," replied Ponsford. "Pringle was a villain——"

"I dessay he was," answered Gaffney coolly; "I ain't here to defend his character. But let's go on. Pringle hoped to be able to take up the bill before it became due, as he told the bankers some tale to prevent them putting it into circulation——"

"He told them," interjected Ponsford, "that I had done it for his accommodation, and that I would not have the thing known for the world."

"Well, you discovered what he had done," continued Gaffney; "and you found out at the same time that he had seduced your mistress, of whom you were passionately fond."

"That is also true," said Ponsford. "But why this questioning? You seem to know all the facts——"

"Stop a moment!" interrupted Gaffney. "It suits me to go over the story along with you; and if we find ourselves of one accord, so much the better. Don't think I'm going for to defend Rupert

Pringle's conduct:—that's not my business. Well, as I was saying you make the two discoveries at the same time—and something happens to lead Pringle to suspect that you have found out the forgery—but he hasn't the slightest idea that you've discovered the seduction of your mistress;—and so he writes you a letter—he confesses the forgery—he explains his motive—he throws himself upon your mercy—he begs you to take up the bill at once and save him from the gallows. Isn't that part of the tale right?"

"Yes, yes," said Ponsford, who seemed to forget his own ominous condition, with a knife at his throat and a pistol at his temple, in the feeling of bitter burning hatred which was aroused within him by these recollections; so that he literally ground his teeth together.

"Well," continued Gaffney, you had your false friend completely in your power: but in order to get him more thoroughly under your thumb, you went and took up the bill for fear lest by any means Rupert Pringle should be able to compromise it with the bankers. And then you made use of the weapons you had thus got into your hands to crush and ruin the poor devil altogether.

"To punish him," said Ponsford. "Do you come here to avenge him? If so, you will be only aggravating his crimes. I dealt mercifully instead of harshly with him. I might have sent him to the scaffold: but I sent him only into exile! I might have exposed him: I hushed the matter up!"

"No—I am not come to

avenge him," said Gaffney, "I've nothing to do with vengeance. You shall see what I am come for when we have done our confab. So please to answer me a few questions. When you had discovered the forgery, received his letter, and got the forged bill in your possession, you sent for him and reproached him with the seduction of your mistress?"

"I did," answered Ponsford.

"You then told him that if he did not immediately leave the country, you would hand him over to the grasp of justice?"

"I did." It was all the punishment that I chose to wreak upon him."

"Very right," said Gaffney: "you was acting as the judge in the case. Well, and you told him that you'd always keep the letter and the bill—that you'd never part with them documents—so that if ever he should dare to show his face again in his native land, you would to a certainty do your very worst? I think this was it—wasn't it?"

"Right," answered Ponsford. "None but Pringle himself could have told you all this!"

"Don't be too fast," interrupted Gaffney: "we have got a little more to say. Now, the truth is that twentyfive years have passed away since those things happened—you benefited by Pringle's ruin—"

"I?" ejaculated Ponsford.

"Come, not too loud!" said Jack Peppercorn: and again the back of the blade was indented into the throat.

"Yes—you!" continued Tim Gaffney: "for you bought the Southdale Farm at half its value. Now don't interrupt me!—I know that's a fact, though

it seems to be the only thing I've yet said which you ain't very ready to admit, so now to the point."

"Ah!"—and the Squire eagerly awaited the coming explanation.

"If Rupert Pringle lives, and comes for'ard, and throws himself at your feet to beg your pardon for his wrongs towards you—will you forgive him and let him buy back the farm at the price you gave for it?"

A sinister fire flashed from Ponsford's eye as he at once and with eagerness exclaimed, "Yes—yes—I'll forgive him! I'll give him back his farm! Let him come to me! There, my good fellows! if this is your mission it is ended—and though you said you did not want to rob me, you are welcome to take my purse off the toilet-table there, and go about your business."

"Ah!" said Gaffney, with a laugh, "so you've fallen into the trap—have you?"

"What do you mean?" asked Ponsford, looking bewildered and dismayed.

"It means that you've still got the papers in your possession—I mean the letter and the forged bill; and that was the reason you snapped so eagerly at the question I put—because you would like to get Rupert Pringle into your clutches that you might hand him over to justice as a forger, *That* would be your game!—but it isn't to take place."

"Then what *do* you mean?" asked the bewildered Squire. "Do you want to murder me?—has Pringle sent you? Good God! have mercy!"

"I tell you again we don't want your life. What the devil is the use of it to us?"

"What use, indeed, as long as he remains quiet?" said Jack Peppercorn. "I'd see you hanged before I'd take your life unless I wanted it."

"The fact is," continued Gaffney, "I've been pumping you. If I'd said to you point-blank, '*Have you got them papers still?*' you would have been up to the dodge, and you would have said '*No*,' off-hand. But now I know you *have* got them, through your eagerness for Pringle to come and throw himself into your clutches. So now to the point:"—and then Gaffney went on to say, emphatically accentuating every syllable, "What we want, and what we've come for, is them papers—the letter and the bill."

"You shall have them," said the Squire. "Let me get up."

Why, you must take us for fools! You can lay there cozy enough, while you tell me where I can go and find the papers; and that being done, our business with you is done also."

"The papers are in the library," said Ponsford. "There is a bunch of keys on the toilet-table——"

"I have them," said Gaffney. "Go on."

"That small key"—and the Squire pointed to it—"opens a writing-desk, which you will find upon a side table between the two windows. The papers are in the upper compartment—they are in a asealed envelope, on which the name of Pringle appears."

"Very good," said Gaffney. "Of course, if you're deceiving me, it will be the worse for you;

for I'll come back to see my pal here cut your throat with all the pleasure in the world.—Now, mate, look sharp! He's a knowing old file, this. Don't let him speak a word; and don't so much as look round if you hear the door open, for you'll know it's me coming back. In short, don't give him an instant's advantage."

"Never you be afeard," responded Jack Peppercorn; and the cold blade again touched the throat of the prostrate prisoner.

Tim Gaffney quitted the room as cautiously as he had entered it—descended the stairs—and stole towards the library. For an instant he thought that he heard the creaking of a footstep behind him: he stopped short—all was still—and he advanced. The moonbeams, penetrating through the holes in the shutters, guided him to the table between the two windows; and he was just on the very point of putting the key into the lock, when he was suddenly seized from behind and hurled to the floor, with one strong hand grasping his throat and the other brandishing a cudgel, with which the victor threatened to beat out his brains if he dared attempt the slightest resistance.

The incident happened so suddenly, and Tim Gaffney was taken so completely unawares, that he was seized as it were with a consternation and dismay, so that he did not even so much as endeavour to clutch one of his pistols. His conqueror—whom we may as well at once state to have been Stephen Ashborne—had all his own senses completely about him; and suspecting that a burglar would be

well armed, he laid down his cudgel for a moment and passed his hand rapidly over the fellows upper garments. He felt the pistols with which Gaffney was furnished ; and hastily snatching one forth, he declared he would beat in the fellow's brains if he dared offer any resistance. He got hold of the other pistol ; and thus having Tim Gaffney completely in his power, he felt in his pockets to ascertain if he had any additional weapons. He found a clasp-knife, which he took away from the man ; and then he demanded, "How did you get hold of the keys with which you were going to open that desk ?"

"Whoever you are," said Gaffney, without answering the question, "I could make it better worth your while to help me than to go against me."

"How so?" asked Stephano Ashborne, with a certain sensation of curiosity.

"Perhaps you think I've come to rob the house——"

"It looks uncommonly like it"

"Well then, it's nothing of the sort," pursued Gaffney. "I only want a certain packet of papers and though you may be surprised to learn what I am going to tell you, it's the truth that I was coming here to get the papers with the consent of Squire Ponsford himself."

"A likely story!" ejaculated Stephano Ashborne. "But what did you mean by saying you could make it worth my while to help you?"

"First tell me who you are," said Gaffney. "Everybody's price is according to his position."

"Well, I am a farm-bailiff," replied Stephen. "And now what

have you to propose?"

"Just you go off to bed and leave me to follow up my own business—and it's a fifty pound note in your pocket."

"The offer is a tempting one," said Ashborne, appearing to reflect. "But what papers are these you are anxious to possess, which are contained in that desk?"

"I've no interest in deceiving you," replied Tim Gaffney: "you shall satisfy yourself. Open that desk and in the upper compartment you will find a packet in a sealed envelope, on which is written the name Pringle. Hey! why did you start like that?"

"I thought I heard footsteps," answered Ashborne; "but it was nothing. Tell me why you came here—who sent you—and what you have done to find out where the papers were? Satisfy me, in short, that your tale is true—or I will alarm the house without further delay."

"And if I tell you the truth?" said Gaffney.

"If you tell me the truth, and convince me that it is such, I will let you escape."

"But I have a comrade in the house——"

"Ah!—a comrade?"

"Yes, I see you mean to accept the proposal I have made ; but you must let me help my pal out of the difficulty in which he would be placed if I wasn't to go back to him."

"Then where is he?" demanded Ashborne.

"Up in Squire Ponsford's chamber," replied Gaffney, who made sure that the bailiff was going to enter into a treaty with him and accept a bribe for placing the seal of silence upon his lips.

"This is strange—most strange!" muttered Ashborne to himself. "But what is your comrade doing in Mr. Ponsford's chamber?"

"Very much the same thing that you are doing to me," replied Gaffney—"keeping the Squire in check till such time as it might suit us to let his worship be in peace and take our own departure."

"Now tell me," said Ashborne, in a determined tone—"who engaged, hired, or bribed you to enter the house for the purpose of obtaining these papers?"

"Must you know all these particulars?" said Gaffney.

"To be sure! I must know everything! If I fall into your plot I must ascertain the depth of it, so that I may calculate how to measure the amount of profit that ought to come to myself. Be quick!—speak! Time is passing!" Tim Gaffney.

"It is a gentleman in London that hired us," replied Tim Gaffney.

"His name?" quickly demanded Ashborne.

"Well, I don't know it. Perhaps it's. Pringle himself, for anything that I can tell to the contrary."

"This is ridiculous!" ejaculated Ashborne. "You pretend not to know his name——"

"It's the truth," answered Gaffney: "I don't know it—or yet where he lives——"

"Then you must have an appointment with him—or you have the means of communicating with him?"

"As a matter of course," replied Gaffney. "Come, I see you want to be let farther into the business than I at first

calculated——"

"Yes—such is my intention," ejaculated Stephen Ashborne. "See here! Move not hand or foot—or I'll shoot you as I would a dog!"

The preceding colloquy between the bailiff and the burglar had taken place far more rapidly than we could detail it; and throughout the discourse the former had continued to keep his knee upon the latter's chest, and one hand at his throat, while the other held a pistol menacingly towards his forehead: so that the villain was completely powerless. Ashborne now arose from off the prostrate one: but he maintained the pistol pointed down towards him; and the moonbeams were sufficiently bright to show Gaffney the proceedings of his conqueror. The latter took up the bunch of keys which had fallen from the burglar's hand; and he demanded which key opened the desk.

"The small one," replied Gaffney.

The desk was accordingly opened: and in the upper compartment Stephen Ashborne found the sealed packet with the name of Pringle written upon the envelope.

"'Tis well!" he muttered to himself; while it struck Tim Gaffney, as he gazed up from his recumbent position on the floor, that a strange expression passed over the handsome countenance of the bailiff, as the moonbeams penetrating through the holes in the shutters played upon his features.

"Now," continued Ashborne, securing the document in the inside breast pocket of his coat, and buttoning up the garment

over his chest, "I shall leave you to get out of the premises, you and your companion, as best you can. Ah! I forgot to observe that I merely hold this document as a trustee for the person who employed you, be his real name Pringle or anything else; and whenever that person shall apply to me for the packet, I will give it up to him."

Tim Gaffney looked astounded as he still lay upon the floor, not daring to move, inasmuch as the pistol was still ominously pointed towards him.

"Get up," said Ashborne; "go and rejoin your companion, and get out of the house as quick as ever you can. Perhaps the Squire may have his reasons for not giving you into custody on the very first occasion that he shall next fall in with you. But I shall stand upon no such scruples if you disobey me in respect to the injunctions I am about to give. These are simply that you say nothing to the Squire of your meeting with me, nor of the fact that you have failed to obtain possession of this sealed packet. Not that I should care very much if you did reveal these facts," added Ashborne, carelessly, "though perhaps it would better please me that you should not."

While the bailiff was thus speaking, Tim Gaffney had raised himself up from the floor; and he made a rapid calculation of all the chances for or against the success of a sudden attack upon his opponent. But he had lost all his weapons; and experience had moreover shown him that he was inferior in strength to the other. He therefore abandoned the idea: but he said sullenly, "You think to get all the reward

for the delivering up of that packet of papers to the person who wants to get hold of them?"

"You are mistaken," replied the bailiff coolly: "I want no reward at all. Make your own bargain with the person—get out of him all you can—all I require is that he shall apply to *me* for the papers."

"Ah, that's another thing altogether!" said Tim Gaffney, to whom the entire proceeding was replete with mystery. "If you hold to that bargain, I'll bind myself on the other hand to say nothing to the Squire about you and me meeting here and your having got hold of the packet."

"Let it be a bargain," said Stephen Ashborne. "But, Ah! one word! How do you intend to effect your departure without doing any violence to the Squire? for it seems to me that if you have set your comrade to keep watch over him——"

"I know what you mean," interrupted Gaffney "but you needn't be afraid—we ain't a-going to silence him by knocking him over the head. A little chloroform does it——"

"Enough!" said the bailiff: "I consent to this arrangement. And now depart. But, Ah! take the bunch of keys with you to the Squire's chamber."

Tim Gaffney stole forth from the library, ascended the stairs, and reached the Squire's room, where he found the aspect of affairs precisely the same as when he had quitted the apartment a quarter of an hour back. There lay the Squire in his couch—and there was Jack Peppercorn bending over him with a clasp-knife at his throat.

"What a deuce of a time

you've been!" said Jack impatiently.

"I thought I heard a noise in the house," replied Tim; "and so I was obliged to lay quiet for a few minutes."

He now drew forth a very small phial from his waistcoat pocket; he poured some of the contents upon his handkerchief—which he then applied to the Squire's nostrils. The effect was almost instantaneous—Mr. Ponsford became insensible—and the two burglars speedily made their exit from the premises.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DEN.

WE must now return to the young Duchess, whom we left at the moment when on issuing from Miss Hartland's house, she was suddenly caught round the waist by the strong arms of a man and thrust into a cab—the fellow following her into the vehicle, which immediately drove away at a rapid rate. It was all the work of an instant: the street was one that was little frequented by passengers—the dusk was closing in—and the countenance of the Duchess was so muffled in the thick folds of her veil that even the ejaculation of surprise and alarm to which she at once gave vent when thus seized upon, was stifled, or at least so far subdued as to prove unavailing. The windows of the cab were closed; and scarcely had the Duchess time to glance towards the fellow who took his seat opposite to her, when he produced a pistol, holding it by

the barrel, and saying at the same time, "If you make any noise I shall be obliged to silence you with a touch of the buttend of this here barker."

The patrician lady shuddered; and to the very depths of her whole being did she recoil, as much from the coarse language of the ruffian as from the threats which it conveyed. Through the folds of her veil she could perceive that he was an ill-looking fellow, with a dark complexion—not tall, but stoutly built—and dressed in a suit of black. She soon recovered a sufficient degree of self-possession to enable her to say, "You surely cannot suppose that I shall be overawed by your shocking threats. You would therefore do well to let me alight at once, ere I dash my hand through the window and cry out for assistance."

"It's of no use, ma'am, for you to come this gammon with me," said the fellow. "My orders is positive. I'm to take you to a certain place; and if so be you don't come by fair means, you shall by foul."

The Duchess, who had now completely recovered her self-possession, was half inclined to make one desperate clutch at the pistol, and then while struggling with the fellow, shriek out for assistance: but she feared lest she might experience some violent treatment at his hands—and a glance flung through the window showed her that the cab was proceeding amidst the narrow streets of that low neighbourhood whose very aspect appeared inimical to the idea that succour could be readily obtained. Suddenly an idea struck her; and she said, "Depend

upon it you have made a mistake. For whom do you take me?"

"Now I tell you what it is, ma'am" replied the man with dogged insolence; "I know that women is up to all sorts of tricks, but you won't succeed in humbugging me. So it's of no use your saying any more. I won't hear, and I won't answer. I'm deaf and I'm dumb!"

The Duchess was just upon the point of proclaiming that if she had been taken for Mademoiselle Imogene a tremendous error had been committed, when she thought to herself, "In this case the ruffian may insist on seeing my face—and then he may perhaps recognise me!"

Her next idea was to offer him a liberal reward to let her go: but then she said to herself, "If I display the contents of my purse, he may perhaps murder me! I must try the former plan at any risk!"—then at the expiration of a minute, during which she again reflected profoundly, she said, "Perhaps you took me for the equestrian actress——"

"It's no use, ma'am! it's no use!" interrupted the fellow in a savage tone. "I know what I'm about—and you'd better hold your tongue."

"Do not think that because I am a woman I am afraid," said the Duchess making a display of all the fortitude which she could possibly command, "A single scream sent pealing from my lips would raise the neighbourhood!"

"You'd better try it. It would save me a world of trouble—I should just give you one knock over the head—and then you wouldn't speak another word before we reached the place that

I'm to take you to."

"Twenty guineas if you let me go!" said the Duchess, now in her desperation offering a reward and hazarding a sum which might be far too much and far too little, she knew not which.

"Twenty guineas?"—and the man laughed with insolent irony.

"Does he think that I am Imogen and that I cannot possess such a sum?" asked the Duchess of herself: "or is he so well bribed by his employers, whoever they may be, that he scorns the puny reward I have offered?"

Indeed the Duchess was perfectly bewildered how to act; and as she surveyed the fellow's sinister expression of countenance, as he sat opposite to her, evidently watching her with the keenest vigilance—holding the pistol in a manner which showed his readiness to use it in case of necessity,—then, as she glanced right and left through the windows, and saw that she was still being borne rapidly through that maze of vile narrow obscure streets,—and as she reflected that the driver of the vehicle was no doubt an accomplice in the plot, whatever its nature and object might be,—a cold terror crept over her and paralysed her energies.

Some few minutes elapsed in silence; and then the vehicle suddenly drew up in front of a house in one of the obscure and half-deserted streets whereof we have been speaking. That house was larger than the rest, and by its size and appearance seemed to have been a habitation snatched up from some street of a better class, carried off bodily, and then dropped down on the spot where we now find it.

The instant the cab stopped, the front door of the house opened. First a young female came forth—then an elderly woman—and then a man of an appearance as sinister as the individual who was with the Duchess in the vehicle. The young female was about sixteen, very slight and pale, with her dark hair arranged in plain bands, and with a simple and neat attire. The elderly woman was of enormous size: her head, naturally large, seemed to be set upon her shoulders without the intermediary of any neck; and as she had a voluminous double chin, the flabby flesh thereof actually rested upon the vast and revolting exuberance of the bust. Yet she was gaily appparelled; and she had a smirking, insolent, sneering air, as she rubbed her hands with satisfaction when coming forth from her dwelling. The man has been sufficiently described as an ill-looking person, very much resembling the individual who had carried off the Duchess; for indeed they were brothers.

"Now ma'am," said the person inside the cab, "you will be so good as to step out."

Then quick as the eye can wink he threw a large silk pocket handkerchief over her head, dexterously drawing it across her mouth, crushing the plain straw bonnet that she wore, and effectually gagging her for the brief period that sufficed for conveying her forcibly into the house. Yes—such was the mode by which she was borne into the dwelling; for she resisted desperately and strove to cry out; but it was all the work of a few instants, the other man and the elderly wo-

man helping the wretch who had been seated with her in the cab. As for the pale-faced girl,—young though she were, there was an expression of hardened depravity upon her countenance, so that it did not appear as if she was very likely to sympathize with the unfortunate lady who was being thus carried into that den of infamy. A couple of guineas were thrust into the hands of the cabman, who nodded significantly to the group and then instantaneously drove away.

The Duchess was borne into a back room on the ground floor; she was placed in a chair—the handkerchief was taken from off her head—and the two men and the palefaced girl retiring, the elderly woman remained alone with her Grace.

"Now, my pretty creature," she said in a voice that was rendered rough and hoarse by drinking and dissipation, "it's of no manner of use for you to give yourself any airs. There will be some one here presently who'll tell you why all this has happened. Don't waste your breath by screaming or crying out, because it won't do any good; and don't think of jumping out of the window, because the back-yard is a dozen feet lower than the level of the street, and so you'll only get broken bones for your trouble."

Having thus spoken, the woman turned and quitted the room, locking the door behind.

Two candles were burning on the table; and the instant she found herself alone, the Duchess started up, flung back her veil, and glanced hastily around. It was a parlour in which she found herself, tolerably well furnished,

but with a visible air of dirt, as if the place were seldom dusted, and as if it were also the frequent scene of orgies; for the table cover and the carpet showed many wine-stains, and there were three or four ends of cigars in the grate. The heart of the patrician lady heaved at the aspect of the place; and she mentally ejaculated, "Good God! that I who live in mansions should be brought to such a den as this!"

She sank down upon the seat almost in despair; but soon recovering a certain degree of self-possession, she exclaimed, "Who could have done this? who on the face of the earth could have perpetrated this outrage? However, he will be here presently—and verily I am curious to know who can be the author of the infamy! Surely, surely I must have been mistaken for Imogen unless indeed any evil-disposed person had watched and dogged me, and availed himself of that opportunity to carry out his nefarious design."

Here we must leave the Duchess in a state of completest perplexity while we shift the scene.

It was a West End hotel and in a private apartment two gentlemen were dining. One was Sir Abel Kingston; the other was Mr. Sylvester Casey. The Baronet was dressed with his usual elegance: the garments, faultlessly cut set off his slender form to all the advantage of its well-knit proportions. As he lounged back in his chair with an easy fashionable languor, he sipped his claret from a glass which he held in one hand, while the other hand drooping over the arm of that chair, dangled a perfumed cambric kerchief. In strong contrast with

his elegant appearance, was that of Sylvester Casey. He was dressed in what he called evening costume:—that is to say a black coat with a velvet collar and silk facings; a blue neck-tie so fastened that the ends pointed horizontally at great length towards the shoulders, a shirt with the bosom very full and wonderfully embroidered, and with studs about the size of shillings—a flaring silk waistcoat, over which two or three gold chains festooned—black pantaloons, and patent leather boots. He wore half-a-dozen rings upon a pair of hands which looked as if they would have been all the better for a little more soap and a little less jewellery. He had been drinking a great deal of wine! his face was very red; and his large green eyes, looking as if they were boiled gooseberries, stood out staringly from their sockets. Always full of pretension in his sober moods, he was boastful and full of braggadocio when in his cups.

The reader may be well assured that so exquisite a gentleman as Sir Abel Kingston would not have condescended for a single instant to remain in the society of such a vulgar individual as Sylvester Casey, if he had not some very good reason of his own; but he had actually invited the usurer's son to dine with him at this West End hotel—though it certainly cost Sir Abel little, or we ought rather to say *nothing* to entertain him, inasmuch as he had credit at the establishment—and though he had a grand idea of ordering dinners, he had not the slightest notion of paying for them.

"Well then, my dear Casey,"

said the Baronet, as he sipped his claret, "you will just drop a hint to your father that he would do well to wait a little while longer and not send me those threatening letters. He knows very well that I have got a little matter in hand—an affair of gallantry—that will no doubt turn out well—though, by the bye, he hasn't dropped a word about that in your hearing; and that's very kind and honourable of him."

"Don't be afraid, old fellow," cried Sylvester familiarly: "I'll make things all right with the governor—I'll take him when he's in the honour. No one knows how to manage him better than I do. Deuced good claret, this, Kingdom?"

"Yes possible. Well then, I may trust to you——"

"Right as a trivet, my boy! Hang the fellow that wouldn't do anything for a friend! I always stuck to a friend like a brick. That's my rule."

"And a very good one too," said the Baronet. "And therefore you'll join me in that little note of hand to-morrow—only for a cool thousand, you know—it's a mere matter of form on your part——"

"Oh, well, we shall see about it," interjected Sylvester, who was not yet intoxicated enough to give the required promise. "By the bye, talking about affairs of gallantry, I've got something that's most likely to come off this evening. I told you, you know, that if I dined with you, old boy, it must be at six o'clock—for that I should most likely have to cut off about nine."

"Well, and how will you know whether you are to go or

not?" asked the Baronet.

"I'm so sure of it that I mean to go," replied Sylvester. "There's no failure in any plan of mine, I can't tell you! Deuce a bit! And by Jove, won't the world talk! My eyes, what a sensation there'll be! Every one will be saying, 'What a lucky dog that young Casey is!' And yet it isn't luck in these matters," he added affectedly, as he thrust his fingers through his horrible hair: "it's good looks."

"No doubt of it," said the Baronet, with a short cough. "Good looks and a certain appearance."

"Yes—a certain appearance," added Sylvester, casting a complacent glance over his own person.

"But about this fair one of yours?"

"Ah won't you be surprised when you know it! Why, every one admires her—you and as much as anybody."

"I?" said the Baronet with a slight start; and then he thought to himself, "Good heaven! this conceited wretch never can be lifting his impudent eyes towards the Duchess! Pshaw! he does not even know her!"

"Yes, old fellow," continued Sylvester, "you'll envy me as much as any man, I can tell you!"

"The deuce!" thought Sir Abel: "this is really getting closer and closer to the point! Do I then, know her?"

Sylvester winked his eye with a vulgar familiar significancy; and then said, "Come, come, it won't do to pump one too close!"

"May I guess it if I can?" asked the Baronet.

"Guess if you like," replied

Sylvester. "But I'll just give you a hint and no more. The stagel!"

Again Sir Abel Started as he thought within himself, "Ah! the Duchess was once upon the stage!"

Sylvester looked knowingly at him; and again winking his eye with a vulgar familiarity, he said, "Do you begin to twig?"

"You don't mean me to understand," asked the Baronet, endeavouring to be cool, "that you allude to a certain brilliant creature——"

"By Jove, I think you are getting pretty near the mark!" cried Sylvester. "Don't you think I am to be envied?"

"But you don't know her!" exclaimed Sir Abel: "or if you do, it can only have been for a very few days—for I remember your telling me——"

"Well, and what if I don't know her to speak to?" proceeded Casey: "don't you think there are other means of getting at one of the fair sex and ending by having an assignation made?"

"By God?" ejaculated Sir Abel, clenching his fist and striking his knuckles with such force on the table that all the decanters, glasses, and dessert-dishes appeared as if they were suddenly seized with St. Vitus's dance: "I will only believe what I see!"

"I'll make you a bet upon it," said young Casey, who was fond of being thought a sporting character, and liked very much to make bets when he knew he was sure to win.

"Done!" cried the Baronet. "Yes, done! for any amount you like!"

"A hundred guineas," suggested Sylvester, eagerly.

"With all my heart!" exclaimed

ed the Baronet, springing up to his feet. "But how shall we decide it?"

"You shall go with me at once, and I'll show you the splendid creature anxiously waiting to to receive me in her arms."

"Insufferable coxcomb!" muttered Sir Abel, as he suddenly turned aside to conceal the rage that was rendering his countenance white and and his lips ashy. "But, good heaven! is this possible? the brilliant Duchess stoop to such a jackanapes as this!"—and he paced the room in a hurried and agitated manner.

"Why! what the deuce ails you, old fellow?" asked Sylvester. "It really looks as if you yourself had been hankering after the beauty, and that you are already envious and jealous of me on account of my good luck."

"When shall we set out? and where are we to go?" demanded Sir Abel, without heeding Sylvester's observations.

"We'll set out at once; but as to the place where we are to go to I shan't tell you until we have settled the terms on which the business is to be conducted."

"Proceed," said Kingston, with assumed composure, but with a veritable inward burning impatience.

"Now, though I want to show you, old fellow," continued Casey, "that I'm no idle boaster—and though I should also very much like to win you money, yet of course I don't want to insult the fair one's feelings, and she mustn't think I'm making a show of her.

"Let me catch but one glimpse of her," said the Baronet; "let me obtain a single glance at her

countenance, either through a key-hole or a window, or during the opening or shutting of a door—and I will acknowledge myself fairly beaten—I will pay you the wagner even though I sell the last two horses that remain to me—and I will moreover look upon you henceforth as one of the cleverest, most fascinating and irresistible of men! In short, I shall regard you as a veritable Adonis, and contemptuously look upon those fellows whom I have hitherto thought very handsome, as nothing less than monsters and vulgarians."

There was a bitter irony in the concluding part of this speech: but Sylvester did not perceive it, his self-conceit blinded him. He therefore smiled with such a cox-combical complacency that the Baronet could scarcely resist the inclination to knock him down.

"You chaps in the Guards," he said, "used to think you could carry everything before you: but some of us civilians are teaching you different. Now you shall come along with me; and mind I when by some means for another I've satisfied you that it's all as right as a trivet, you'll just be so good as to take yourself off at once and leave me to enjoy the fruits of my conquest."

"That is a bargain," said Abel. "Have you any other conditions to dictate?"

"None," replied Sylvester.

"But I have something more to say on my own account," resumed the Baronet. "I've told you what I shall think if you satisfy me that your statement is correct and that you are really and truly favoured in this instance. But if on the other hand I find that you have deceived me,

I shall expose you as a black-guard and a scoundrel—yes, regardless of all consequences that may arise from provoking your father's anger!"

"Come come, old fellow," interrupted Sylvester, colouring up to the very roots of his red hair 'this isn't the right sort of thing—you're coming it a little too strong—'

"True, my dear fellow! true!" said the Baronet, with a peculiar smile. "I had no right to address you in such language. Forgive me. Here is my hand."

"Oh! it's all right," said young Casey; "there's no ill-will betwixt you and me. Only when you talk in that style, you know, it was putting my monkey up—and I'm a devil of a fellow if I once get into a passion. However, you and I don't want it to get into the newspapers that there's been 'an affair of honour in high life—Sir Abel Kingston Captain in the Guards'—'Sylvester Casey, Esquire'—and all that sort of thing."

"No, no!" interjected the Baronet, with a smile of passing irony and contempt; there is not much fear of *that*. But now let us set off."

The two gentlemen left the hotel and took their seats in a cab, which at once drove away Sylvester simply saying to the driver, 'Cut over Westminster bridge, and then I'll tell you where to go to.'

The Baronet now studiously avoided a topic which he felt he could not approach without experiencing an almost irresistible inclination to inflict personal chastisement on his companion. For through Sir Abel's mind was floating a species of logic to

the following effect:—"If the young jackanapes is deceiving me, as a matter of course he deserves a sound thrashing: and if on the other hand by any inconceivable combination of circumstances he is telling me the truth, it is equally my duty to trounce him within an inch of his life, for having outrivalled me. But we shall see."

When the cab had entered upon the Westminster Road, Sylvester presently bawled out, "To the right!"—and then, as it turned into the maze of narrow streets, lanes, and alleys composing all that part of Lambeth, Sir Abel thought to himself, "The fellow is lying after all!" As if *she* would ever come into such a neighbourhood as this!

The cab rolled on; Sylvester presently leant half-way out of the window, and gave some final instructions to the driver. The Baronet continued to discourse on indifferent topics; but his irritation kept on increasing on finding that there was a certain flippant and impertinent accent of confidence—a sort of overweening superciliousness, in Sylvester's voice.

At length the cab drew up at the door of a house in one of those obscure wretched streets; and Sylvester, springing out of the vehicle, said, "Now, old fellow, we are here!"

He rushed into the house; and meeting the elderly woman in the passage, he hastily demanded in a whisper, "Is it all right, Mother Grills?"

"All right," was the answer. "But who is your friend?"

"Not a word about the trick! not a syllable!" said Sylvester quickly. "He must think she

came of her own accord! There's a bet on it 'twixt me and Sir Abel. You twig?"

Mrs. Grills nodded significantly to young Casey; and at this moment Sir Abel Kingston entered the passage. The pale-faced girl shut the front door, and Mrs. Grills begged the two gentlemen to step into the front parlour,—observing that "she was all alone there, for that Mr. Grills and his brother Jasper were just taking their quiet glass and pipe together in the kitchen down-stairs."

"She's here, old chap!" said Sylvester to the Baronet, the moment they entered that parlour.

Sir Abel was on the point of thundering forth the words, "You lie! It is impossible!"—but he restrained himself, and said with assumed composure, "Well, if so, I congratulate you. But now for the proof?"

"You post yourself in the passage," said Sylvester, after a brief exchange of whispered observations aside with Mrs. Grills "in such a way that you can see into the room; and the old woman here will just step in to ask the sweet creature if she wants anything. Mind now! it will only be the work of a moment—and you must keep yourself as much in the shade as possible. If she does happen to catch a glimpse of you, I shall tell her presently that it was me she saw in the passage."

"Good," said the Baronet. "And now let it be done at once."

Mrs. Grills led the way into the passage; and she posted the Baronet in an angle formed by a turning contrived

for the arrangements of the staircase. He was there completely in the shade, even when the light should stream forth from the room which the woman was about to enter. Sylvester Casey remained on the threshold of the front parlour, watching with some little anxiety, but yet with more confidence, the proceeding which he hoped would establish him in the Baronet's estimation as the most successful young *roué* about town. As for Sir Abel himself, he was utterly bewildered what to think : for on the one hand it seemed to be most stupidously preposterous to suppose that the brilliant Duchess of Ardleigh could have come to such a den of iniquity as this—while on the other hand it was difficult to comprehend how or why Sylvester should be carrying on a delusion and a farce to such an extreme point.

All uncertainty on Sir Abel's part was however soon destined to be put an end to, for Mrs. Grills now opened the door of the back parlour ; and there, sure enough ! rising up from a chair near the table, in a plain dress, and with her veil thrown back, was the brilliant Duchess of Ardleigh !

Mrs. Grills immediately closed the door : but the Baronet had seen enough. Rage—fury—madness took possession of his brain. Springing forward like a bounding tiger, or an unleashed hound, along the passage, he tore open the front door, seized upon Sylvester Casey, and with one tremendous kick sent him flying across the threshold into the street. He then banged the door violently, and rushed towards the room wherein he had caught that

momentary glimpse of the brilliant Duchess. Mrs. Grills was at the instant coming out ; and she exclaimed in an angry voice, "Hey day ! what does all this row mean ?—Grills ; Jasper !" she shouted, evidently summoning her husband and brother-in-law from the lower region ; "are you asleep down there ?"

"Hold your tongue, beldame ! and let me pass !" cried the Baronet, who was labouring under a fearful state of excitement.

"Oh, if all you want is to go into this room," said Mrs. Grills, suddenly pretending to soften down, "I'm sure I've no objection. As well you, sir, as any other !"

She accordingly stood aside : Sir Abel Kingston burst into the back parlour—but he stopped suddenly short, literally transfixed with amazement : he found no one there !

"Where is the lady whom I saw here scarcely three minutes back ?" he demanded, suddenly recovering his self-possession.

"What do I know about ladies?" said Mrs. Grills, putting her hands upon her lips and looking at the Baronet with an insolent air of defiance. "It's for the gentlemen to take care of the ladies, and not for me !"

The Baronet strode up to the cupboard—tore open the door—but beheld no one. He looked under a sofa and under the table ; and then hastening to the window, he flung up the sash, and was just leaping upon the sill, when the woman called out, "Take care, you lunatic ! there's a fall of a dozen feet beneath the winder !"

A glance flung downward showed Sir Abel that the woman

had spoken truly ; and he stepped back into the room, exclaiming, "Twenty guineas if you'll tell me what has become of her!"

Meanwhile there was a violent and continued knocking at the front door ; and Mrs. Grills gave a hasty instruction to her husband and his brother Jasper, who had just emerged from the premises below. They seized upon the Baronet; and Mrs. Grills also lent her assistance. Despite his struggles, his threats and imprecations, they carried him to the front door, which the pale-faced girl at once opened. Sylvester Casey, who had been thundering with the knocker for the last two minutes, was about to rush furiously in when the form of the Baronet was literally thrown at him, and the two rolled together in the street.

The front door was banged—a chain might have been heard to be fastening inside—then in the twinkling of an eye every light was extinguished in the habitation—and an up-stairs window being thrown open, the head of Mrs. Grills, decorated with a great white nightcap, was thrust out, her hoarse voice exclaiming, "Get along with you, you drunken blackguards ! what do you mean by kicking up this row at the door of a respectable house ? police ! police ?"

"Come quick, you fool !" cried the Baronet to Sylvester Casey, who was whimpering and crying out that he had been infamously treated : but he now thought fit to follow Sir Abel Kingston in the retreat which he rapidly beat from the neighbourhood of the house where such singular adventures had taken place.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BARONET AND SYLVESTER.

We left Imogen locked in the arms of Launcelot Osborne, when, after the departure of the Duchess, he had sworn to her in the most enthusiastic language that he loved her more than life. With what fervour did he strain her to his breast ! with what fondness did she cling with her arms about his neck ! How happy were they at that moment ! Everything was forgotten on the part of Launcelot except that he might love her ! everything on the part of Imogen except the sweet knowledge of being thoroughly and completely beloved by him !

"And now, dearest Imogen," said Launcelot, at length, "go and fetch that pretty little child : for as you love me, so will I love her—and since she cannot look up to her own parents for affectionate care, she shall receive it from us !"

It was impossible that Imogen's warm heart could have received a greater proof of Launcelot's love than that which he was now affording her. Of her own accord she threw her superbly modelled arms about his neck—she pressed him to her bosom—she kissed his lips unasked. Then she glided from the room, her exquisitely shaped feet scarcely seeming to touch the carpet on which they moved so glancingly ; and up the staircase she bounded. Though she was only absent half a minute, yet it was with the fondest impatience that Launcelot awaited her return ; for he longed to show all possible kindness towards the

child whom his Imogen loved so tenderly. He felt that she must be a young woman of a wonderful excellence of heart that she had displayed so much mingled devotedness and self-sacrifice for the sake of that child, and that she was therefore one of those rare sterling creatures who possess qualities even more attractive and endearing than their physical beauty.

Imogen returned to the parlour with little Annie in her arms; and then the child wondered why the gentleman should take her upon his lap and caress and fondle with her so; but she smiled with the innocent sweetness of infantile gratitude—and then she seated herself in perfect happiness at the feet of the lovers, as they sat half-embraced upon the sofa.

All of a sudden Imogen started up—glanced at her watch which lay upon the table—and then pressing her beautiful white hands against Launcelot's cheeks, she said, "I must leave you, dearest! I must fly to the theatre! I am already late."

"Must you go?" he asked, with a look of mingled fondness and regret.

"Oh, yes! it is absolutely necessary! and I am so happy—and my heart is so light! Oh! my performance will be perfectly brilliant this evening!"—and with an ingenuous smile she displayed her teeth of dazzling whiteness while her pure fragrant breath fanned his cheek.

"Well, you must go, dear Imogen—yes, you must go for the present!" said Launcelot. "But you must soon give up this life!"

She again threw herself into

his arms—they embraced tenderly—and he took his departure; for with the natural delicacy of his feelings, he understood that Imogen would stand a chance of being compromised if he were to escort her to the theatre.

The star of the equestrian circus was indeed only just in time to take her part in the performances; and never had she appeared more ravishingly beautiful!—never had she ridden the horses with greater spirit! There was all the supple lightness of the Bayadere in the form which was so striking and brilliant; her eyes shone like stars; and her teeth appeared to be like orient pearls between the parting roses of her lips. The applause she elicited was, if possible, more enthusiastic than ever.

Launcelot was not there to behold her. He had hastened home, that he might indulge in the luxury of his own thoughts—that he might abandon himself to the delicious ideas which were now floating in his mind—that he might bask in that roseate flood of lustre which is shed upon the heart from the sun of fancy's own-created heaven!

Let us now return to Sir Abel Kingston and Mr. Sylvester Casey, whom we left as they were hurrying along the street where Mrs. Grill's habitation was situated, and fearing that the hoarse voice of that dame should bring the police into the neighbourhood. At length they relaxed the celerity of their pace; and then Sylvester said sulkily, "Now, Sir Abel, what the devil does all this mean? You—you—owe me explanations. I—I—am in a deuce of a rage!"

"One word first of all!" inter-

jected the Baronet, stopping short and catching hold of Sylvester forcibly by the wrist. "There is a mystery in all this——"

"I should think there is," said Sylvester surlily: "so perhaps you'll explain why the deuce you kicked me out into the street?"

"Where is the letter," demanded the Baronet, "in which the assignation was made?"

"Letter? Oh, ah! But that's of no consequence to you," continued Sylvester, who for an instant was thrown off his guard, he having forgotten the tale he had told sir Abel at the hotel. You owe me the bet—and you owe me an apology too——"

"Apology!" echoed the Baronet with disdain.

"Come, come—that's too good," said Sylvester, affecting to be courageous and spirited. "You have used me shamefully what the deuce must Imogen think——"

"Imogen?" echoed the Baronet with a quick start of surprise.

"Why, yes—that is her name—isn't it? But what is the matter with you now?"

"Nothing, nothing," said the Baronet, infinitely relieved in one sense, for he saw that some tremendous mistake must have been committed—but nevertheless getting more and more bewildered as if he were floundering farther and farther into a perfect morass of perplexities. "Now do tell me, my dear fellow," he continued, addressing Sylvester in a coaxing tone of familiarity, "how was all this managed? I really have a reason for asking."

"Well, do you acknowledge that you have lost your bet?"

demanding young Casey.

"Let us consider that the bet is off altogether," said the Baronet, "I will tell you why. Of course we were speaking all the time of Mademoiselle Imogen—were we not?"

"Of course we were," replied Sylvester. "Who else could we have been talking of?"

"No one, certainly. We understood each other all along—and it was that which made me so savage when on looking into the back parlour I saw it was not Imogen at all!"

"Not Imogen?" ejaculated Sylvester, in astonishment "Come come, this won't do——"

"On my soul I am telling you the truth!" rejoined Sir Abel. "Besides, you can soon satisfy yourself; for we will go straight to the theatre and see whether Mademoiselle Imogene performs this evening."

"To be sure! that's the very ticket! But how the deuce could such a mistake have happened?"

"Well, it *has* happened. Of this you may be assured. The moment I caught sight of the face of the female who was in that back parlour——"

"Did you know her?" demanded Sylvester, eagerly.

"Oh, no: I never before saw her in my life. And now tell me how your proceedings were managed, so that we may fathom, if possible, the mystery of so much confusion?"

"Why, the truth is," said Sylvester, who, now that his project had completely failed, saw the necessity of endeavouring to gloss over the ridiculous predicament in which it had placed him as a discomfited braggart,—“I have long had a

fancy for Mademoiselle Imogene; and between you and me I have got tired of Alice—she is so dreadfully extravagant! Well, I am not a sort of fellow to go running after girls and making love to them—I hate showing that I am spooney upon them—it makes them take all sorts of advantage of one. I like to go in and conquer at once. So having made up my mind in the present case, I went to those Grills—I've known them for some time—very useful people they are——”

“No doubt. Proceed.”

“Well, I gave them their instructions. I have learnt, you see, Imogen's habits of Alice Denton, who is her intimate friend. I therefore knew that when she had dressed for the theatre in the evening—which she always does at her own lodgings—she wraps herself up in a great long mantle, puts on a bonnet with a thick veil——”

“Ah, ha! I begin to comprehend,” said the Baronet, “What a daring fellow you are, Sylvester!”—and Sir Abel pretended to chuckle with the most good-natured familiarity, because he saw it was only by such means he could extract the real truth from the self-sufficient jackanapes. “You had her carried off by force—eh?”

“Well, that's the history of the whole proceeding,” said young Casey. “But, I suppose, from what you tell me, that they must by some means or another have got hold of the wrong person?”

“That they assuredly did,” answered the Baronet. “And now what do you think of yourself having endeavoured to

persuade me that it was an assignation made by Imogen herself?”

“Oh, well people *do* draw the long bow a little in matter of love,” laughed Sylvester.

“Ah! but the bet that you sought to win of me under such circumstances?” interjected Sir Abel.

“All fair likewise:”—but young Casey's wonted assurance now forsook him somewhat, for he could not conceal from himself that Kingston thoroughly saw through his mean, dirty, pitiful behaviour.

“I do not think it *was* all fair,” said the Baronet, coldly; “and the business, if made public, would redound, Mr. Casey, but little to your credit. Indeed, you would be regularly cut by everybody; and instead of becoming a regular fashionable gentleman about town—as I know you wish to be thought——”

“Oh, but my dear fellow,” said Sylvester, thoroughly frightened and bitterly humiliated, “I thought the business was entirely between you and me?”

“So it is for the present. Ah! by the bye, you will just send me your acceptance, to-morrow morning, to that little bill for a thousand pounds which I asked you for; and then we need not talk any more, you know, of the adventure of this evening.”

Sylvester made a horrid grimace: but he faltered out an affirmative; and in a few minutes the door of Astley's Theatre was reached. The two gentlemen entered; but while they were ascending the staircase to the boxes, their ears caught the tremendous applause

which they knew full well could only be elicited by the Star of the Circus. And sure enough, in a few moments, they beheld her performing in her favourite character—more radiant in beauty and more spirited in her achievements than ever !”

“Well, it is as you told me,” whispered Sylvester to the Baronet, “and it wasn’t Imogen who was carried off. But, Ah ! what the deuce does this mean?”

His looks were attracted towards a particular box, in the front row of which were seated a stout vulgar-looking lady of about five-and-forty, and a very pretty girl of eighteen or twenty, whose mien was altogether as pleasing as that of her elderly companion might be said to be the very reverse. The dame was fanning herself—for she was very hot; and she thoroughly answered to that description which is summed up in the somewhat vulgar but expressive word, “blowzy.” She was dressed in flaming colours, her toilet displaying the worst possible taste; while that of the young lady was simple, plain, and yet elegant.”

“Who are they?” inquired the Baronet, following the direction of Sylvester’s looks.

“Why, my mother and sister, to be sure! Who would have thought they were coming to Astley’s to-night? You don’t know them, I think? Come along, and I’ll introduce you.”

For a moment Sir Abel Kingston recoiled from the bare idea of being seen in a public place of entertainment in the company of the blowzy dame with the red perspiring cheeks, the huge fan, and the dress that was so trum-

perry and ridiculous with its pretence of flaming gorgeousness. Was it not sufficient that he ventured to appear at a theatre with the vulgar gentish-looking son? He was therefore on the point of declining the honour of an introduction to Mrs. Casey, when on taking a second look at her daughter he all in a moment changed his mind; he said with a timid smile, “Thank you, my dear friend—nothing will give me greater pleasure.”

Sylvester was hugely delighted at the thought of being enabled to introduce a real living Baronet, who was also a Captain in the guards, into the same box where his mother and sister were seated; and he already looked about him with the mien of a person who was fully prepared to give himself all sorts of airs. He and Sir Abel made their way to the box where the ladies were placed; and it happened that the benches immediately behind had just been vacated by a party on account of one of the female members fainting through the heat of the place. There was consequently ample room to enable Sylvester and Sir Abel to approach Mrs. Casey and Selina.

The introduction was effected in a style most eminently characteristic of the gentleman who performed that duty.

“Why, mother, who would have thought of seeing you here evening? This is my friend Sir Abel Kingston—a regular blick. I think you’ve heard the governor speak of him? My mother, Sir Abel. And this is my sister Selina—a deuced nice girl, though I say it which shouldn’t say it.”

The elderly lady bowed and simpered: the young lady gracefully inclined her head and blushed; while the Baronet thought to himself, "Good heavens! is it possible that this sweet and beautiful bird can belong to such a brood?"

"Very" appy to make Sir Habel's acquaintance," said Mrs. Casey. "You'll pardon Sylwester Sir Habel, for throwin' in a flat-terin' word about his sister——"

"Oh, certainly, madam. But I have no doubt that Miss Casey deserves ev'rything amiable and complimentary that can be said of her."

The object of this piece of adulation blushed slightly, and with a reserved air she took up her playbill.

"Yes, Selina," continued Mrs. Casey, pronouncing the *i* quite broad, instead of calling her daughter Seleena,—Selina is a very good gat—plays the'arp and the peeanner—and can make a tart or pudden as well as the best cook in all Hingland."

Sir Abel coughed very loud, and he likewise coloured very much; for there were some ladies in the next box who were infinitely amused by these displays of vulgarity on Mrs. Casey's part.

"Betwixt you and me and the post, Sir Habel," continued Mrs. Casey, who not perceiving the effect her discourse was thus producing, talked louder and louder for the behoof of those persons who were seated in her immediate neighbourhood, "Selina is as good as disposed of, so to speak. A nobleman's son is a-keepin' company with her ——"

"Mamma, do look at Mademo-

iselle Imogen!" hastily said the young lady in a whisper, while a crimson glow suffused her countenance, descending even to her neck, which an instant before was of ivory fairness.

"I see Himogen!" replied the dame; "and I should enjoy myself much better if there was'nt such a heat that makes one all perspiry. But where are you going, Sir Habel?"

"Hem! hahl ma'am:"—and the Baronet coughed and looked very much confused. "I thought I saw a freind across yonder:" and he pointed at random at some visionary acquaintance on the opposite side of the house.

"What, that gentleman with the 'ook nose and yaller waist-coat? Why that's Mr. Shineybrass the pawnbroker, up in 'Oborn! He wisits sometimes at our 'ouse in 'Atton Gardin——"

Fortunately the rest of Mrs. Casey's observation was drowned in the perfect *furor* of applause which accompanied the exit of Mademoiselle Imogen from the circle.

"But let me see," resumed the dame, as Mademoiselle Rose, a beautiful French girl, now took her place in the ring, where she rode with an elegance and skill inferior only to the proficiency of Miss Hartland,—*"let me see, what was I a-sayin'?"*—Oh! I was tellin' you, Sir Habel, that my Selina is almost as good as engaged to the Honourable Launcelot Hosborne; and when the weddin' takes place, we'll send you a billy:"—by which word the worthy dame meant to express the French term *billet*.

There was an universal titter in the adjoining box: and the Baronet, unable to endure the

ordeal any longer, suddenly pleaded a violent headache as an excuse for his departure.

Mrs. Casey was one of those persons who always shake hands with everybody, even though her acquaintance with them be of no longer duration than two or three minutes. If she made a morning call at a house where she found twenty other visitors in the drawing-room at the same time and all strangers to her on her entrance, she would shake hands with them every one on taking her leave. Was it therefore to be supposed that she would let Sir Abel Kingston depart without conferring upon him the usual testimony of her friendship? She extended a hand that was large enough to fell an ox, and which felt very hot even through the kid glove,—at the same time saying, “I know you’ve been to ‘Atton Garding’ on business: but the next time you find yourself there, you must come up into the drawing-room and just ‘ear Selina play one of her hairs. We always lunches at one; but if you like some day to drop in and take pot-luck with us at five we shall be very ‘appy to see you’ll have a corgial velcum.”

The Baronet was suffering excruciations; but with an appearance of the most gentlemanly ease, he turned towards Selina, saying, “I shall not fail, Miss Casey, to avail myself some day of your mamma’s kind invitation.”

He then shook hands with the daughter—though she was very far from offering her own hand: and he bowed himself out of the box, thinking to himself, “Good Heavens; what an old vulgarion!

But one might do worse than marry the daughter;—and by Jovel if she were’nt engaged—though perhaps even *that* need not be an impediment; for Launcelot Osborne is as a sentimental milkshop—”

Here the Baronet’s reverie was rudely interrupted by Sylvester Casey, who slapping him familiarly on the shoulder, said, “Let’s go up into the strand and play billiards. It’s slow work here.”

Sir Abel was about to decline when on a second thought he accepted the proposal; for it occurred to him that he might just as well avail himself of the opportunity to obtain from Sylvester all the information he could in reference to the engagement between Launcelot Osborn and Selina.

CHAPTER XX.

ARDLEIGH HOUSE.

The reader is doubtless anxious to learn how it was that the Duchess of Ardleigh contrived to escape so suddenly from the house belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Grills. It will be borne in mind that she had been prepared to expect the visit of some one who would give her explanations in reference to the outrage which had been perpetrated towards her. She had thrown back her veil because the atmosphere of the room appeared to stifle her; and there she sat revolving in her mind the circumstances of her position, and the mode in which she should act when the individual, whoever he might be should appear in her presence. she was more than half-inclined

to fancy that she had been carried off in mistake for Imogen ; indeed she could scarcely see any other possible solution to the mystery. Being therefore under this impression more than under any other, it was by no means in accordance with her intention to let her face be seen when the door opened. But that door had opened so suddenly—the Duchess was in so profound a reverie at the instant—and she was thus taken so completely by surprise, that she started up forgetting her veil had been thrown back ; and thus was it that Sir Abel Kingston had obtained that glimpse of her features which was sufficient to show him who she was.

Mrs. Grills had instantaneously closed the door again, and it was an ejaculation of astonishment which burst from her lips. The Duchess comprehended it ; and she said in hasty tones, "I am not the right person whom you expected?"

"No, that you ain't ! Why, how is this?"—and Mrs. Grills looked almost bewildered.

"It was a mistake ! Tell me, was it not intended to carry off the actress Mademoiselle Imogene ? Speak, and you shall be rewarded !"

"Yes—that was what was meant. But who are *you* ma'am?"

The Duchess was rejoiced to find that she was not known ; and she said, "No matter who I am ! Ah, that disturbance !"

"The two gentlemen who have come !" ejaculated Mrs. Grills. "I do believe one's fighting with the other !"

"Good heavens ! who are they ? who are they ? Speak, woman ! I mean to deal liberally with

you !"—and she drew forth her purse.

"Well, it's young Mr. Casey—and how disappointed he'll be !"

"And the other ?"

"I heard Mr. Casey call him Sir Abel."

"Heavens !" was the ejaculation which again burst from the lips of the Duchess ; and for a moment a violent trembling seized upon her : but the next instant recovering her presence of mind, she said, "Fifty guineas if you let me escape !"

"Done !" cried the delighted Mrs. Grills.

The Duchess flung a bank-note and some gold upon the table ; and Mrs. Grills caught up the money with avidity. The next instant she threw up the window, and simply said, "The ladder !"

This was immediately supplied ; the Duchess descended—and she found Mr. Grills and his brother in the yard below.

Now the fact was these worthies instead of smoking their pipes in the kitchen, had been sitting on the sill of a window beneath the room where the Duchess was confined ; for they thought it prudent to keep watch lest she should attempt to make her escape. Hence the promptitude with which they obeyed the summons of Mrs. Grills ; and they asked no questions—neither did they pause for the slightest syllable of explanation—inasmuch as they knew that whatsoever the dame herself might do, would be the result of a sudden necessity or else of an equally potent appeal to her personal interests. The whole proceeding was conducted in the course of a few seconds ; and while the Duchess was traversing a little yard

towards a back gate, Mrs. Grills was facing Sir Abel Kingston in the passage.

Having given these explanations, we may resume the thread of our narrative.

It was the day after the adventures of which we have been writing, and between one and two o'clock in the afternoon, when the door of the drawing-room in which the Duchess of Ardleigh was seated, was thrown open; and the domestic announced Sir Abel Kingston. It was exactly ten days since she had last seen him, at Thornbury Park, when she had enjoined him not to seek her presence again until he should receive some communication from her.

"Can he have found out where I was last evening?" was the first question which instantaneously occurred to the Duchess; and a flush swept across her countenance; but the next moment it had disappeared, and it was with the most perfect self-possession so far as the outward demeanour was concerned, that she gave him her hand.

There was nothing peculiar in the Baronet's manner,—nothing significant so as to make the Duchess suspect that he knew aught of her adventure of the preceding evening: but he wore that look of love and tenderness which he had of late assumed towards her; and there was likewise somewhat of respectful entreaty in his tone, as he said, "May I hope, dearest Mary, that you are not angry because I come without receiving permission from you?"

"Let that scene which your words recall be entirely forgotten," said the young Duchess;

for her soul now recoiled from the man who she naturally thought frequented such dens as that where accident had so nearly thrown them together on the preceding night. "I beg you, Sir Abel, to look upon me as an acquaintance—a friend, if you will: but—but——"

"Mary, what means this coldness? Perhaps you have not made any discovery of the kind which I mentioned in reference to your husband? And yet I swear to you that it was the truth!"

"Who told you," asked the Duchess, "that Herbert was keeping a mistress in the neighbourhood of Tunbridge Wells?"

"It was a person named Manning, a horse dealer at Maidstone. He sold some horses for me—your husband bought them—he gave a cheque signed with his own name——"

"Yes, yes—I recollect! you told me at the time," said the Duchess. "But I had forgotten——"

And have you willingly forgotten all the kind and hopeful things you said to me on that occasion when I walked with you at the grounds in Thornbury?"

"Do not remind me of it! But come, Sir Abel," said the Duchess assuming a lively air, as if suddenly throwing off some cause of restraint: "Let us talk on general subjects. What think you of the prospects of the opera season? how do you like the new novel?"

"Oh, Mary!" exclaimed the Baronet; "how can you find it in your heart to treat me thus? Now listen to me while I tell you that I know you have discovered the truth of my statement in reference to your husband's mistress

at Addington.

How so?" ejaculated the Duchess, with a start.

"Because I received a letter from some one, telling me that the establishment at Dahlia cottage is broken up——"

"And that *some one*?" inquired the Duchess.

"That very same Manning the horsedealer. The animals have gone back into his hands; and the lady herself left the place precipitately, with her nurse and her child. But of course you know all this as well as I can tell you."

The Duchess remained silent. She remembered her pledge to the Baronet; and though the love, or rather the fantasy she had coceived for him, had very much subsided, she nevertheless knew not how to answer him.

"What were your words, Mary—the words from your own lips?" he proceeded to say "Did you not swear that if you found I had deceived you in reference to your husband everything should be at an end between us?—but if on the other hand you discovered that the facts were precisely as I had represented them *then* the first vengeance which you would wreak upon your husband, should be to fulfil your pledge of love unto me—in a word, that you would be mine? Now answer me, Mary!—have I deceived you? If you tell me that I have—or if you hesitate to answer—I will then take it upon myself to convince you——"

"Sir Abel Kingston," interrupted the Duchess, while the colour went and came in quick transitions upon her countenance and her bosom heaved and fell visibly; "a woman in a moment

of weakness may promise more than is consistent with her safety on earth and her salvation in heaven——"

"Answer me one word, Mary," said Sir Abel in a sombre voice and with gloomy looks: "you are seeking to fly from your word and to break the compact of love which existed between us?"

"If I have the courage to stop short on the very verge of an indiscretion—a crime!" she answered, while the red blood again flushed her cheeks, "is it for you who pretend to love me, to seek to drag me down into the abyss! Oh, you ought to strengthen me in my resolve!"

"This is ridiculous, Mary!" interrupted the Baronet, with anger and disgust, which he did not particularly study to conceal for he saw that she was playing a part, though he was at a loss to surmise upon what grounds or for what purpose. "If you ever loved me, you love me now!" and he took her hand.

"She withdrew it, saying, "Let us be friends!" only true friends!"

"I will not be thus trifled with!" cried Kingston. "By what motives are you swayed in your present conduct? Not by any returning love for your husband; because you have discovered his infidelity! Not by any reviving fondness on his part towards you; because he is absent, and unable to show it! What then am I to think? That you are a prude—a jilt—a coquette? that you have deliberately trifled with me? I should be sorry to think so!—and yet before I come to a conclusion, I will ask you for the last time whether you still keep your compact with me?"

"And if I refuse?" asked the

Duchess, who experienced a presentment that the present scene must now be brought to a crisis of some kind or another.

Sir Abel Kingston bent upon her a strange look; and he said in a low sombre tone, "If you trifle with me, all my love will turn into hatred, and you shall be made to feel that you are in my Power!"

The brilliant Duchess started: her cheeks flushed—her bosom heaved as if it would burst through its prisonage of corset: then she became very pale—and she murmuringly repeated the words, "In your power?"

"Aye!—and deeply would it grieve me to come to angry words with you and prove that such is the fact!"

"Explain yourself, sir," she said, determined to put him to the fullest test.

"Need I ask the Duchess of Ardleigh where she was last evening?"

"What do you mean?"—and the air of astonishment which she assumed appeared to be the most natural.

Sir Abel was not deceived by it; and he replied with a look of the most wicked significance, "when a door opened and a certain woman entered a particular room, I was in the passage—and I obtained a glimpse of the lady in that room. She was plainly dressed, with a large muffling cloak—she had on a simple straw bonnet, and the veil was thrown back from over her countenance. That lady was you!"

"Indeed? This is an extraordinary delusion!"—and the Duchess laughed.

"Do not compel me to test it

by such rules as shall prove it to be a veritable fact. How was it that the brilliant Duchess of Ardleigh could have placed herself in a position to be carried off in mistake for the actress Mademoiselle Imogene? I confess that at present I know not; neither am I yet aware how your Grace escaped from that room wherein I saw you. But there are ample means of proving the whole mystery—and by heaven, I will do it!"

The Duchess now felt as if a mask had fallen completely from the countenance of the man who had pretended to love her; and she saw that he was a selfish, malignant, ungenerous individual. So much the more reason, thought she, for dealing with him in a manner consistent with the utmost prudence and with the astutest policy. But how? She required time for deliberation; and in the interval she must play the hypocrite.

"You are unkind towards me," she said, in a soft murmuring voice: "you will not help me to save myself when I wish to be saved. I must yield—not to your threats but to the weakness of my own feelings. On the third night hence, between nine and ten o'clock—No: better that it were later—between ten and eleven—you will meet me at Thornbury—in the same avenue—you know where I mean—close by the statues—"

"Enough, Mary, said the Baronet, overjoyed at the idea of the triumph which he considered to be already as good as achieved. "A thousand, thousand thanks, dearest, for the hope with which you have now filled my soul!"—and taking her hand, he pressed it to his lips.

"I need not ask, Abel," she said, in a low voice, and with a flush upon her cheeks, "whether you took care that no one else but yourself should become acquainted with the fact that I was carried off by force——"

"No one else knew it!" exclaimed the Baronet. "But how in heaven's name, dearest Mary, could you have been in such a position? how was it that you were either coming out of the house of the equestrian actress, or else passing through that street at the moment——"

"It was a fantasy on my part—I wished to know her. But I will tell you all about it when we meet at Thornbury. And now leave me, Abel!—leave me, I beseech you! I am not well—I am nervous and agitated from the incidents of last night——"

"No wonder! I will leave you, my sweet Mary. But, Oh! it will appear an age until we meet again at Thornbury, according to the appointment which you have given me!"

He again pressed her hand to his lips and then took his departure.

"Miserable hypocrite!" ejaculated the Duchess, as the door closed behind him. "You profess to love me—and yet frequent such dens as that where you saw me last night! Ah! and you would use coercion to bend me to your purpose? And then you kiss my hand, and thank me, and speak sentimentally, and now that you love me! Yet what motive can you have for this base hypocrisy? It is that you burn to possess me? or is there some other motive which I cannot fathom? No, no—I will not succumb! There was a time when I

liked you—yes, might have *loved* you!—but it is past—and you now seem to be altogether a different being! The mask has fallen from your countenance—you are hideous in my sight! But, Oh, my God! I am in your power!"

The Duchess clasped her hands together, and she shivered from head to foot as she thought of the tale which the Baronet might tell in reference to the incidents of the preceding night.

"At all events," she said to herself, "I have got three days before me to arrange some plan; and that is an advantage! Who knows what may turn up?"

It was thus that the Duchess gave way to her reflections; but the day passed without enabling her to settle in her mind any project by which she might emancipate herself from the power of Sir Abel Kingston.

In the evening the Duchess learnt that her husband had just returned to Ardleigh House, but that he had at once repaired to his own chamber, alleging that he was ill, and desiring that he might not be disturbed. She did not therefore go near him. In the morning she sent her favourite maid Lavinia to inquire after the Duke's health: she was informed that he was much better—that business compelled him to go off immediately into the City—but that he should see her Grace in the course of the day: and then for form's sake before the servants, he superadded some message couched in terms of seeming affection.

The young Duke fancied that Ethel would most probably come up to London with the least possible delay to see Mr. Warren

the stock broker in reference to the sum of five thousand pounds which had been invested in the Bank in her name. He longed to see her—to implore that she would change her mind, and that she would not separate herself eternally from him! It was therefore in the hope of falling in with Ethel that the Duke proceeded to Mr. Warren's office in the neighbourhood of the Bank of England. The stockbroker had not yet arrived. Herbert waited and waited with the most feverish impatience. Would Ethel come? or would Warren make his appearance? He was anxious to enlist Warren as an intermediary to plead on his behalf with Ethel, in case she should call at an hour when he himself should not be there waiting for her. At length, between one and two in the afternoon, a servant came from Mr. Warren's house at Highbury, to tell the head clerk that his master would not be there until the next day, as he had run down into the country to secure the purchase of some celebrated race-horse which he had suddenly learnt was to be disposed of.

"I will call to-morrow morning at ten punctually," said the Duke to the head clerk. "Tell Mr. Warren that I shall be here, if he happen to arrive before me."

Herbert then returned to the West End; and on reaching Ardleigh House, he was informed that two persons desired to speak with him on every important business. They were waiting to see him, and in the meanwhile had been shown into the library. Thither the Duke accordingly proceeded; and he

found, as indeed he had expected, that his visitors were Mr. Timothy Gaffney and Mr. John Peppercorn. They were dressed in brand new apparel from head to foot: a ready-made clothing mart had supplied them with suits confectioned after the sporting fashion which they both affected: they had gold chains festooning over their waistcoats and rings upon their fingers. Altogether these worthies were better up in the world than ever they had before been in all their lives: and as a matter of course they were in the greatest possible spirits.

"Beg your Grace's pardon, my lord, said Tim Gaffney, as he and his companion both made a very respectful bow to the Duke; "but you told us as how we might come——"

"You have not heard or seen anything of—of—that lady?" demanded the Duke hurriedly.

"Nothing, my lord,!" was the response.

"I believe you returned to Southdale—you said you thought of doing so——Was anything suspected there?"

"Nothing, my lord. Everything was so well managed——"

"Enough!" said the Duke. "I suppose I can guess what you require of me—you have experienced some difficulty in changing the notes——"

"Just so, my lord," responded Gaffney; "and we therefore thought we would take the liberty——"

"It is no liberty. I told you that you might come. But hush!"

At that instant the handle of the door was heard to move; and hence the ejaculation with which the Duke's speech abruptly

closed. The door opened—and the Duchess made her appearance. She had been told that the Duke had returned and that he was in the library: she did not know that there were persons with him; but on the contrary, she thought the opportunity favourable for learning how he had fared at Southdale in his pursuit after Ethel. On perceiving however that there were two individuals with him, the Duchess was just on the point of retiring, when she caught sight of Tim Gaffney's countenance. She recognised him immediately: but she maintained the utmost composure upon her own features, as she now advanced into the library, saying to her husband, "I thought to have found you alone; but I suppose you are not particularly engaged?"

"Not very particularly," answered the Duke. "only these persons called to speak to me about some horses which they have to sell——"

"Ah! then, it is not a subject," exclaimed the Duchess, "which need exclude me from the room? On the contrary, I am very much interested in it—especially as I myself want you to treat me to a new pair for my light open carriage—and I must also have another saddle horse."

Then, with the most natural air in the world, the Duchess advanced into the room and took a seat near her husband on one side of the table, while the two men were standing on the other side.

"I do not know that those persons have got anything that will exactly suit you, my dear," said the Duke, who as a matter

of course wished that his wife had not taken it into her head to make her appearance at that particular juncture.

"Oh, we will see!" cried the Duchess. "This person,"—turning towards Tim Gaffney—"will perhaps have the goodness to inform me—But, by the bye, what is your name, sir?"

The fellow had started on hearing the Duchess of Ardleigh's voice. He looked at her very hard from under his hat. Could it be possible that the Duchess of Ardleigh and the disguised lady whom he had driven between Maidstone and Addington were one and the same person? If so, would she continue to pretend not to know him? And was she now asking his name for the purpose of helping out that pretence? Such were the questions which the fellow asked himself; and he very naturally concluded that her wanderings in masculine apparel, if the same lady it really were, must be unknown to her husband, and that she would not therefore for the world seem to recognise Mr. Timothy Gaffney!

"My name, your Grace?" said the man, after a brief hesitation. "Why, it's Gaffney at your service."

"Gaffney?" repeated the Duchess, with a merry laugh, "What a singular name! Gaffney! I wonder whether I ever heard it before?"

The Duke looked annoyed; and he hastily whispered, "Don't annoy the man, Mary."

"I have not the slightest intention of giving Mr. Gaffney any offence," said the Duchess, speaking audibly. "I am sure

he will excuse me for making myself merry at his name—will you not, Mr. Gaffney?"

"Oh, to be sure, your Grace!"—and now Tim affected to laugh also; but somehow or other he did not altogether feel completely at his ease.

"Well, Mr. Gaffney," continued the Duchess—and there was a roguish merriment lurking in her clear liquid blue eyes,—“have you anything in the shape of horseflesh that will suit me, according to the requirement which you just now heard me mention to his Grace? Or perhaps your companion there—By the bye, premit me to ask his name?"

The individual thus alluded to felt somewhat abashed: but Tim Gaffney, plucking up his courage as he beheld the mirthful appearance of the Duchess, hastened to say, "This is my friend Mr. Peppercorn."

"Oh, indeed! Gaffney and Peppercorn—horsedealers! an excellent firm, no doubt!"—and again the Duchess laughed merrily, her musical voice ringing through the room, and her parting lips displaying the two rows of her beautiful teeth, so white and so even.

The Duke looked at her in a perplexed manner: he felt as if there were a scene passing before him which he could not understand.

"And pray," she went on to inquire, "where may your establishment be situated—in London or in the country?"

"Oh, in the country, your grace," answered Gaffney. "At Maidstone."

"Ah, at Maidstone? Let me see!" continued the Duchess, as

if she were deliberating within herself. "I think I have heard of another horsedealer of some celebrity in the same neighbourhood. I believe I've had some dealings with him. To be sure! I recollect now! His name was Bax."

Jack Peppercorn now gave a sudden start; for all in a moment it struck him that the Duchess of Ardleigh must be the disguised lady of whom his friend Tim Gaffney had told him, and who had played the said Gaffney so clever a trick in stopping the draft or order which she had given on a banking establishment in the Strand. Tim instantaneously trod on Peppercorn's toe, as an intimation that he was to keep quiet and betray nothing before the Duke; so that Jack was again instantaneously on his guard.

"Ah! Bax, I believe," said the Duchess, "is a highly respectable man."

"I do not remember ever to have heard of him," said the Duke, again gazing upon his wife in bewildered astonishment.

"Indeed? Then you must have forgotten the name," she responded, with an air of the utmost *naïveté*. "But I'm afraid I am only interrupting business and detaining Messrs. Gaffney and Peppercorn with my frivolous discourse. Therefore I will not stay more than a minute longer; and that is for the purpose of saying that you, Mr. Gaffney, must really endeavour to procure me such horses as I require."

"Leave it to me, my dear," said the Duke; "and I will give Mr. Gaffney a memorandum of what you want."

"The very thing I myself was

about to do!" exclaimed the Duchess; "and then I will take myself off."

Thus speaking, she proceeded to shift her position to the further extremity of the table, where there were writing materials; and having penned a few lines upon a slip of paper, she folded it up, and tossed it across the table to Gaffney, saying, "There! put that in your pocket, and look at it at your leisure."

"I won't lose sight of the matter your Grace," replied Tim, as he consigned the paper to his waistcoat pocket; and at the same time he darted a significant look at the Duchess—for he felt assured that there was some ulterior meaning veiled beneath the proceeding which she had just adopted.

She retired from the library; and the Duke now fancied that what he had conceived to be peculiar in her manner must have been after all nothing more than a mood of hilarious gaiety to which a special impulse was given by the mention of a name that had tickled her fancy.

"Her Grace really believes that you are horsedealers," said the Duke, with a smile, as the door closed behind her.

"Oh, yes—her Grace believes it, my lord," replied Gaffney. "But here's the banknotes," he continued. "We've managed to change a few of'em——"

"How many have you there that you cannot change?" inquired the Duke.

"There's flimsies the amount of fifteen hundred pound," responded Tim.

"Then I will tell you what I can do," said the Duke: "I will

give you a cheque on my banker, and you can ask to have it all in gold.

"Well, I'd rather not, my lord," answered Tim, fidgeting with his hat. "Somehow or another I don't like bankers—they've a orkard way of asking chaps how they come by cheques for large amounts——"

"Then how *can* we manage it?" exclaimed the Duke somewhat impatiently. "Ah, I see a means! I will write my name on the back of every one of these banknotes; and then no doubt you can pass them?"

Tim Gaffney signified his assent—the notes were duly endorsed—and the fellows took their departure from Ardleigh House.

The Duke then sought the Duchess; and he told her some portion of the incidents which had occurred at Southdale—but without stating how Ethel had been arrested for destroying the leaf from the parish register; and inasmuch as he suppressed that painful episode through a delicate regard for Ethel's character, it was not necessary for him to state how he formed the acquaintance of Messrs. Gaffney and Peppercorn. The Duchess was bewildered what to think of the visit of those persons to her husband: but not for an instant did she believe that they had come to make a deal with him in respect to horses. However, as he said nothing on the point, she had no pretence for introducing the subject; and moreover she knew that her curiosity would not be tried for any considerable length of time, inasmuch as she might be in a position to clear up the mystery from Tim

Gaffney's own lips on the following night.

"And thus," said the Duke, after a pause, "everything is at an end between Ethel and me!"

"Do not think so," responded the Duchess. "Rest assured that she will communicate with you again! It is in the nature of woman to do so. But this is a subject you and I must not discuss."

CHAPTER XXI.

MR. WARREN.

MR. WARREN, the stockbroker returned from the country at about nine o'clock in the evening and on reaching his splendidly furnished house at Highbury, he found his head-clerk waiting to see him.

"Well, Mr. Phipps" said the stockbroker, throwing himself into a large easy chair in his dining-room, and motioning for his clerk to resume the seat from which he had respectfully risen "what news in the City?"

"Here's a number of letters, sir."

"All right—put them down—I will look over them presently. What else?"

"The Duke of Ardleigh called this morning, sir—at about ten o'clock," proceeded Mr. Phipps. "His Grace waited until nearly two——"

"What did his Grace want?" inquired Warren.

"His Grace did not say, sir; but he appeared very anxious to see you—he looked weary and restless—he said he should be at the office punctually at ten to-

morrow morning——"

And you told his Grace that I should be sure to be there? Well anything else?"

"Yes, sir," responded Phipps "at about three o'clock that lady called—the same that the Duke brought to the office the other day in the cab—you remember the occasion, sir?—it was when he came rushing in first of all, positively enjoining that he was not be addressed by his title——"

"Yes, yes," said Warren, impatiently: "I know whom you mean! Mrs. Trevor, as he called her—or Miss Fraser, as her name really is."

"You brought in five thousand pounds in that name, I believe, sir?" said Phipps.

"Well—perhaps—I daresay I don't recollect. In a large business, Mr. Phipps, one does not remember details. What did this lady want?"

"I do not know, sir, she inquired for you—she asked if you did not live at Highbury—she said that if it were not against the rule of propriety and of business, she should like to call upon you here——"

"The deuce!" ejaculated Warren. "Why—what on earth—I mean——But what did you tell her?"

"I hope I have not done wrong, sir," answered Mr. Phipps; "but as she assured me that she had a very important reason for making such a request, and as she seemed careworn and distressed in mind, I said that I thought you might possibly have no objection to relieve her either to-morrow morning at nine o'clock before you came into the City, or in the evening at six after your return."

"Quite right, Phipps—quite right," said Mr. Warren. "Anything else?"

"Nothing, sir, that I know of. Only Mr. Casey called to-day, and she said he should look in again to-morrow——"

"Ah, well, well!" interjected Warren: "then it does not appear that I've been particularly missed? And now take a glass of wine, Phipps—and then good evening to you."

It has already been said that Mr. Warren was a tall, good-looking man, under thirty years of age. He dressed elegantly—he maintained a splendid house at Highbury and a shooting box in the country—he kept his mistress in a beautiful villa somewhere in the neighbourhood of Upper Holloway—he also kept hunters, racers and a yacht—he gave magnificent entertainments and was liked by everybody as a good-hearted, jovial, dashing kind of a fellow, as well a thorough man of business, of unquestionable integrity and undoubted wealth.

"Oh!" he muttered to himself when Mr. Phipps had taken his departure,—“at nine o' clock to-morrow morning or at six in the evening?”—and then a singular expression swept across his countenance: but as it almost immediately vanished, he rang the bell and ordered the footman to send up supper at once, not forgetting a bottle of champagne.

The tray, laden with splendid plate, was soon brought in; but Mr. Warren did not appear to have any appetite when the viands were set before him. He, however, drank the champagne with avidity, and then proceed-

ed to look over his letters, making a running commentary upon their contents as he successively opened them.

"Dr. Mordaunt—eh? Wants to know when he is to have the scrip of the Constantinople and Belgrade Railway. Ah, well! that will keep. Sir Moses Bellamy—Oh! about the twenty thousand—three per cents. The dues! he is getting impatient! What's this? That bothering schoolmaster, Smithers, of Norfolk! What a tirade! Pooh, who could drag oneself through it?—and all about a beggarly three thousand. Ah! what's this? Seymour's handwriting! By Jove! if he begins—But! Pshaw! it's only to let me know of the yacht dinner next Monday! Well, that's a comfort. What next? Old Casey? Why, he called, Phipps said. *Insists* on seeing me to-morrow! The devil he does? Ah! here is quite another *billet*. 'Lady Todmorden's compliments.—What is it? Ball, eh—on Thursday week! Ah, ha her ladyship has got three portionless daughters to get off—and she thinks that Christopher Warren, stock-broker, would make an excellent match for one of them! What a world it is!—what wheels within wheels!—what a continued series of illustrations of the process of diamond cutting diamond! Ah! it is indeed a rum world!"

The reflection made Mr Warren more and more thoughtful; and then he applied himself to a second bottle of champagne, the effect of which was eventually to put him into such excellent spirits that he started up, snapped his fingers, and seemed to be in a position to bid defiance to the

whole world.

Mr Warren sat down again; and he now looked more deliberately over his letters than he had previously done. The strain in which two or three of them were worded, began to produce an effect which counter-balanced the exhilarating influence of champagne. The stock-broker felt himself growing moody and desponding once more: he also experienced a sensation of drowsiness—but he did not dare retire to bed immediately, for he knew that by the time he reached his chamber he should be broad awake again, and he did not exactly like to be left alone with his own thoughts. Presently he sank back in his arm-chair—his head dropped forward—and if he were not at once enveloped in the actual unconsciousness of slumber, he at all events sank into a state of dreamy repose.

He now fancied that the door slowly opened and someone looked in; but he could not distinguish the countenance of the individual. Then it appeared to the stock-broker that this person advanced with noiseless footsteps into the room, shutting the door behind him. Warren endeavoured to exercise the power of speech sufficiently to ask what the intruder wanted: but it seemed to him that he could not give utterance to a syllable. He felt as if he were in a trance, having a certain dim and vague consciousness of what was passing, but unable to make the slightest physical exertion. And now it seemed to the stock-broker that the intruder sat down opposite to him at the table; and resting his elbow thereon, he shaded his countenance with his

hand in such a way that Warren could scarcely obtain a glimpse of it; and yet he had the intuitive knowledge that the stranger's eyes were fixed scrutinizingly upon him. A species of superstitious terror gradually stole into the mind of Christopher Warren; but by an effort he gasped out, "Who are you? Are you man or devil?"

And then it seemed to the stock-broker that a low mocking laugh sounded upon his ear, and that in the same sardonic accent, the intruder replied, "Yes—you are right. I am a Man-Devil."

The consternation of the stock-broker now appeared to be utterly overwhelming, and consciousness abandoned him. But it was not the unconsciousness of a swoon—or at least it seemed as if it were only from a very profound slumber that he presently awoke gradually and drowsily, scarcely knowing where he was, or whether he were still dreaming. He found himself in his arm-chair; the lamp was still burning bright upon the table; and opposite to him sat a gentleman, who at once rising from his seat, said with a tone and manner which displayed as much careless ease and off-hand indifference as actual politeness, "I must apologize for intruding at this hour; but I was determined to wait your convenience—and you see that I have done so."

Mr. Warren rubbed his eyes—then stared at his visitor—and asked, "How long have you been here, sir?"

"Oh, not very long. In fact, your nap has been but a short one. I amused myself with the newspaper——"

But your name, sir!" eja-

culated Warren, recollecting a certain impression which had previously been made upon his mind, though he scarcely knew whether it were a dream or a reality.

"My name? Oh, I told you just now:" and it was a strange low-mocking laugh which came forth from the intruder's lips.

Warren started up. He was about the last man in existence to entertain a superstitious fear; but he could not help feeling that the present proceeding was at least a strange one, and there was a certain vague uneasiness in his mind.

"You said your name, sir, was _____"

"You asked me somewhat more impetuously than politely whether I were a man or a devil."

"Yes, sir—I was doubtless half-asleep—almost quite so; and if I mistake not, you replied—"

"Well, sir—what did I reply?" demanded the visitor; and his eyes appeared to twinkle with a demoniac mischievousness. "You asked me if I were a man or a devil—"

"And you said that you were a Man-Devil!" exclaimed the stock-broker, now almost inclined to get into a rage as his superstitious feeling of uneasiness was rapidly passing off.

"Ah! did I pronounce it like that?" said the individual, with the utmost coolness; and again the low sardonic laugh came gliding from his lips.

"What do you mean, sir, by this jest, so ill-timed—almost impertinent?" demanded Warren who, being now broad awake again, inwardly ridiculed the idea of having anything to do with more than a man in the

person of this intruder.

"Jest indeed! It is you, sir, who seem to be making a jest of that which is sober seriousness. I call to see you—you ask me my name—I give it—and you accuse me of being impertinently jocose! Do you know, friend Warren"—and he laid his hand familiarly upon the stock-broker's shoulder—"if I had not come prepared to be very good friends with you—"

"In one word, sir," exclaimed Warren, retreating so as to disengage himself from the hand which was laid upon his shoulder "who are you? and what do you mean by this extraordinary conduct?"

It was with a sort of easy politeness, quite cool and off-hand, that the stranger answered, "I have already told you that my name is Mandeville: and as for my business, it shall be explained in due course."

"Mandeville?" echoed Warren with an air of surprised inquiry.

"Why, yes—Mandeville. I must have said so just now—only you told me that I pronounced it Man-Devil, and I was too polite to contradict you."

"Ah! Mandeville! That is indeed a proper name—natural and intelligible," said Warren, beginning to be as much ashamed as amazed at himself for the ridiculous mistake which it seemed he had been making.

"Yes—here is my card. The name, as you may perceive, is a French one—and it is pronounced with a more fluid rapidity than that which you now bestowed upon it."

The stock-broker took the card and he read the name and

address of COUNT DE MANDEVILLE, *Rue de Provence, Paris*. This line was in the corner ; but a mark with a pencil had been drawn through it ; and the words *Clarendon Hotel, Bond Street*, were substituted.

"I sincerely beg your pardon, Count," said Mr. Warren, confused and bewildered at the idea of the extraordinary reception which he had given the French nobleman : "but to tell you the truth, I have returned from a fatiguing journey—I drank a little too much champagne—sleep stole over me——"

"Enough, my dear sir," interrupted the Count ; "no further excuse is necessary :"—and he smiled with a half familiar, half patronising air.

The stock-broker bowed ; and his eyes now fell upon his letters which lay upon the table.

"The deuce!" he thought to himself ; the Count may have read them while I slept," but a second glance reassured him ; for he said to himself, "No—they have not been touched ! That is just how I left them ! At least, I would almost swear to it."

He now looked again upon his visitor. Count Mandeville was not above the middle height and his figure was not characterized by any remarkable degree of symmetry. He was slender ; he carried himself well ; and his shape was of the average standard. But yet there was something distinguished and imposing about the man. He was dressed with the most fashionable elegance ; and there was an ease in his manner—a certain freedom of motion, of posture, and, gesture, which gave him the appearance of one who felt so completely at

his ease as to bespeak him a member of the *elite* of Parisian society. He was not particularly handsome : yet his was a countenance which would be pronounced something more than merely good-looking. It was one to which the beholder would turn to take another view. The grey eyes were vivid and variable in their expression : the brows, very dark, were thick, but well divided and high arched : the dark hair seemed to curl naturally : the glossy moustache terminated in points slightly curled : the whiskers were large, but admirably trimmed ; and the Count wore that tuft of hair below the under lip which is denominated an *imperial*. He had a brilliant set of teeth : his nose was perfectly straight : his complexion pale, with the least tinge of sallowness. His voice was as variable in its tones as his eyes were in their expression ; for he seemed to have the power of modulating it in no ordinary degree, so as to suit the sense and significance of whatsoever he might be saying at the time. It would be fluid and dulcet when he invested himself with that exquisite air of true foreign politeness which he could in a moment assume ; or it might become sardonic and taunting—or coldly ironical—or impressive with its intense bitterness of accentuation. As for his age, the stock-broker judged it to be midway between thirty and forty—though it might well be a year or two more or less.

Such was the personage who had thus so singularly introduced himself to Mr. Warren at eleven o'clock at night ; for this was the hour indicated by the time-

piece on the mantel. It seemed as if the Count maintained silence for some two or three minutes, and affected to be taking a leisurely survey of the apartment, in order to allow Mr. Warren an opportunity to contemplate the appearance of his visitor.

"It seems, then," said the stock-broker with a polite bow, "that I have the honour of speaking to Count Mandeville?"

"Count Hippolyte Mandeville, at your service," was the reply.

"At my service," said the stock-broker. "On the contrary, I should presume that it is I who must hold myself to be at your service, Count."

"We shall be of mutual service," rejoined Mandeville, with a look of mysterious significancy.

"Be kind enough to explain yourself. But ah!" added the stock-broker, "permit me to observe that you speak English with a remarkable fluency and accuracy."

"No wonder. I was educated in England—and I am as well acquainted with all your manners and customs as I am with those of my own native country. But now to the point, Mr. Warren. I require your assistance in certain matters—and you require mine."

Warren started; and then ejaculated, "I require yours?"

"Yes, truly. A man who is in difficulties always needs the assistance of a friend."

"Difficulties?" and then the stock-broker became pale as death, as his eyes again fell upon the letters which lay on the table.

"Yes—difficulties," repeated he Count. "You talk in your

sleep, my dear Mr. Warren. Perhaps you did not know it before; but now that I tell you of it, you will be on your guard for the future. Never take a nap in the presence of another person, or in a room where you may chance to be intruded upon."

Warren gazed upon Mandeville with a half-frightened, half-stupefied look; he knew not what to make of his extraordinary visitor.

"Doubtless you went to sleep with the contents of those letters uppermost in your mind," continued the Count, with an air and tone of easy confidence; "and thus in your sleep you rendered me as well acquainted with your troubles and apprehensions as if I had perused the letters for myself."

Warren was almost inclined to vociferate forth in an enraged tone. "And you *did* read those letters while I slept!"—but he thought it better to restrain himself; and with a forced calmness he inquired, "To what is all this to lead, Count Mandeville?"

"Listen to me," was the response. "You stand on the verge of destruction—and I can save you. You are overwhelmed with difficulties—and I can extricate you. You dread the visits of certain clamorous individuals to-morrow at your office—and I can make them each and all grovel at your feet imploring you to retain the sums the restitution of which they were first determined to enforce."

"Good heavens! who are you!" asked Warren, in utter bewilderment.

"Did you not take me for a Man-Devil?"—and the Count now laughed in that peculiar

strain of sardonism which made one shudder to hear him.

"Oh, you are welcome to your jest," exclaimed Warren, "if you will only convince me—But, good God! what am I doing?" he interrupted himself, at the same time turning pale with dismay. "I have made admissions—they are tantamount to confessions!—and you a complete stranger!"

"Stop! I will place you perfectly at your ease," interjected the Count. "I told you that our services are to be mutual. I have three distinct favours to demand at your hand, and in return for which I will perform all that I have promised."

"Name your demands," said the stock-broker eagerly; for he longed to enter more deeply into a business which promised such important results for himself.

"A lady bearing the name of Ethel Trevor, or Fraser, will call upon you to-morrow."

"How do you know this?"

"No matter. It is sufficient that I have stated the fact. Now understand me," proceeded the Count: "I have conceived for that woman one of those sudden passions which some people term love at first sight, and which perhaps do full well merit the name: and this passion must be gratified. You will help to hand over that beauteous creature into my possession."

"And what is your next demand?" asked the stock-broker.

"You will introduce me to Lady Todmorden's ball next Thursday week," responded Mandeville.

"Ah!"—and again the stock-broker glanced at his letters; for he was now more than ever convinced that the Count had

looked at their contents while he slept. "But proceed. What is the third demand?"

"That you write me a letter in the course of to-morrow or next day," rejoined Mandeville, "to the effect that you have made the different investments with which I charged you; and you will mention, in a casual and natural manner, that the sum total is sixty or eighty thousand pounds—or you may even go higher if you think fit."

"I understand you, Count!" said Warren, now assuming an air of familiarity. "You wish to get into good society—and you desire to pass as a rich man."

"Let there be no disguise between us," said Mandeville coolly. "I am an adventurer—you are an insolvent. You shall help me to build up my fortunes—and I will save yours from total ruin. Is this a compact between us?"

"Show me that you have the power to do as much for me as you promise," replied Warren, "and rest assured that I shall not hesitate to what lengths I go on your behalf."

"Listen," pursued Mandeville, "while I furnish you with weapons whereby you may bring those whom you now fear into the position of wretched grovelers at your feet. Mention their names one by one. Or shall I do it for you? First, then there is Doctor Mordaunt——"

"True!" ejaculated Warren; "a man who if he once suspect that I am playing him false——"

"You shall coolly avow it to-morrow," interjected Mandeville; "and I tell you that you shall see him at your feet! But prepare

to hear a strange story—something which you have little suspected, and which perhaps had better remain altogether untold, were it not an indispensable means of helping you out of the predicament wherein you are placed.

Mandeville then proceeded to relate certain facts to the stock-broker, who grew greatly excited as he listened; and when the tale was finished, he started up exclaiming, "But who in the name of heaven are you that you could have become possessed of a knowledge of such circumstances?"

"You know who I am," answered the Count. "I am the Man-Devil:"—and again he laughed with that mocking irony which seemed to be the veritable malice-mirth of a fiend. "But to be serious!—what if I had all these facts from the lips of one who was enabled to reveal them with the most fearful accuracy?"

"But the proof! the proof!" exclaimed Warren. "Give me the proof—and Mordaunt is indeed in my power!"

"Well, the proof," said Mandeville calmly; and with his characteristic easy deliberation of manner he drew forth a pocket-book, turned over some papers, and selecting one, presented it to Mr. Warren saying, "I received it from Matthew Calvert himself."

"And he is no more," said Warren: "the report of his death reached my ears a long time ago."

"He is no more," replied Mandeville. "But look! there is a proof which Doctor Mordaunt cannot controvert."

"By heaven! 'tis as you pro-

claim it!"—and an expression of joy seized upon the stock-broker's countenance: then he immediately added, "The villain!—who could have thought this? And now I have him in my power!"

"Yes—Mordaunt is in your power," rejoined Mandeville. "Whose name comes next? Sir Moses Bellamy. Listen!"

Mandeville entered into particulars concerning this individual. Then the name of Mr. Smithers, a school-master at Norfolk, was mentioned; and concerning him likewise certain information was forthcoming. Then the name to Michael Casey was adduced; and Mandeville still proved himself able to make important revelations.

"Is there any one else? he inquired, when his narrative in respect to Michael Casey was finished.

"There is no one else, I think, who is likely to press me at this particular moment. Nevertheless" continued Warren, after a minute's reflection, "there is an individual, who, if he happen to suspect anything, and were to turn round upon me, could in a moment work me the direst mischief—"

"You mean Seymour, the great railway contractor," interjected Mandeville: and then he in his turn meditated profoundly for some brief space. "Respecting this man," he presently went on to say, "I will tell you nothing—there are certain reasons—"

"Do not leave me at his mercy," exclaimed Warren, "after all you have done to save me from the power of the rest!"

"I do not mean to leave you at his mercy," replied Mandeville; "but at the same time I do not

intend to draw away the veil of mystery as I have done in the other cases. Listen! If Mr. Seymour threatens or molests you, look him hard in the face—assume a sinister significance of expression—and say to him these words: *‘There is a secret in your life which you little think is known to me, but which in an extraordinary manner has come into my possession, and for the establishment of which proofs would not be wanting. Beware how you drive me to desperation, and force me to retaliate against you!’*—These are the words which you are to speak. Mark their effect!”

There was a brief silence, which was broken by the stock-broker, who said, “Tell me, I beseech you, how came you to be aware of my difficulties? For you must understand that it is of vital importance for me to know in what quarters they are suspected: for I did not even think that my head clerk Phipps entertained the slightest notion

—”
 “Make yourself easy on this score,” interrupted Mandeville: “it was from your own lips, I tell you, that I ere now learnt enough to set me thinking; and then I saw those letters lying on the table before you. I read them—Of course you know that I did. But now we understand each other—and it is sufficient. The compact exist—does it not?”

“It does,” replied Warren. “And now what is your wish in reference to Ethel Fraser, or Trevor—whichever she calls herself?”

Count Hippolyte Mandeville explained his views and gave his instructions on this point—having done which he imme-

diately took his departure; and when he was gone, it actually appeared to Warren to be a mystery whether the entire incident were not a dream.

CHAPTER XXII.

ONE—TWO

MR. WARREN rose at an early hour in the morning, and he said to his footman, “A lady named Mrs. Trevor will call here at nine o’clock. Present my respectful compliments, and say that most important business—Indeed,” added Mr. Warren, carelessly playing with his watch-chain, “nothing less than a summons from the Chancellor of the Exchequer to attend him at his official residence in Downing Street—compels me to leave home thus early; but that I shall be most happy to receive her at six o’clock this evening.”

The stock-broker then walked up to Highbury Place, where he took a cab to convey him into the City; for it was too early to have out any of his own equipages; and besides, it was considered more business-like to proceed in a public vehicle, even though it were an omnibus, to one’s office. On reaching his establishment, he repaired to his private room, where he was presently attended by his head clerk, Mr. Phipps. This person was a middle-aged man, of sleek appearance—very respectful in his demeanour—who never said anything more than was necessary, and never seemed to know anything more than he ought to do. He was

grave, yet urbane—with a look of placid business-like inscrutability; so that it was impossible to say to what extent he might be acquainted with his master's affairs, or whether indeed he suspected that there was anything wrong in them at all. Nevertheless, Mr. Warren knew that if Phipps had the slightest motive for instituting inquiries he could scarcely fail to learn that there were some little things which were not exactly as correct as they ought to be; and therefore the question was whether such a motive had ever piqued the curiosity of the head clerk? This was the point which Mr. Warren was now anxious to clear up.

"Phipps," he said, while standing at his desk, with his hat on and leisurely opening his letters, "did any one happen to call here yesterday besides the persons you mentioned to me last night? A—a Count Mandeville, for instance?"

"No, sir. I don't know the name."

Warren looked very hard at his clerk over the edge of the letters which he affected to be scanning at the moment; but there was nothing in the meek bland respectfulness of Mr. Phipps' countenance to gainsay the response which he had given.

"Oh, well, I rather expected such a person. I think we shall do a considerable business with him. I am going to invest sixty or eighty thousand for him to-day—he is a man of great wealth—he was Chamberlain or something of that sort to Louis Philippe—I think he is staying at the Clarendon. So if he should call, you will of course

treat him with all possible distinction."

Mr. Phipps bowed in assenting acknowledgment of the order which he had just received.

"By the bye," continued Warren, "did either of those persons who called yesterday say anything more than you mentioned to me? I mean did they seem——"

"I do not think, sir, that I mentioned any one except the Duke of Ardleigh, Mrs. Trevor, and Mr. Casey."

"Ah—no! But I saw by the letters which you left me that Mordaunt had called—and Bellamy—and Smithers—and Seymour——"

"They merely wrote their notes, sir, on finding that you were not at the office, and went away."

"Because you see, Phipps, I do not want it to be imagined," continued Warren, "that I run about on pleasure-excursions when I ought to be attending to business. What do people say—eh, Phipps?"

"They know, sir, that the business goes on as well—and I may say as prosperously, sir, when you are not here, as when you are here—though this is perhaps taking too much credit to myself——"

"Not at all, Phipps. I suppose they all *do* know it to be a very prosperous business—eh?"

"Oh, of course, sir. No one could doubt *that*," added the head clerk emphatically.

"Tis all right," thought Warren to himself; and then again addressing Mr. Phipps, he added, "By the bye, you have now been twenty years in the office—twelve in my father's time and eight in mine—and

you must take another fifty pounds a-year to tack on to your salary. No thanks, Phipps! you deserve it."

The head clerk bowed very low, expressed his gratitude, and retired into the front office.

Very shortly afterwards the Duke of Ardleigh was introduced; and when the usual greetings were exchanged—for they were on very friendly terms, the stock-broker being invited to his Grace's dinner-parties—the Duke said, in an anxious tone, "That lady, my mistress, will most likely call upon you about the settlement; and I wish to see her."

"That may be easily managed, my lord. I can make another appointment, and in the meanwhile give your Grace the requisite notice."

"But she will beg and beseech you to do nothing of the sort!"

"Ah, well my lord," replied Warren, "your Grace's commands are paramount; and you can make it appear as if you dropped in quite by accident."

"That is precisely the way in which I desire the matter to be arranged. I rely upon you, Warren."

"You may, my lord," rejoined the stock-broker.

The Duke of Ardleigh then took his departure and Mr. Warren sat down to read the morning paper, as well as to reflect upon his singular interview with Count Mandeville on the preceding evening. At about eleven o'clock Dr. Mordaunt was introduced. This gentleman was about sixty years of age; and having for the greater portion of his life struggled hard against a variety of opposing influences—having

endured much poverty and fought a hard battle amidst the *downs* of life in order to work his way up—he had risen to eminence and to fortune as a West End physician. He was a tall, thin, spare man; and if his voice had any suavity or his manner any urbanity, both were the result of a severe and continuous torturing rather than the tural attributes of the individual himself.

"Mr. Warren," he at once said, "I have called at this hour at much inconvenience to myself, to receive my scrip in the Constantinople and Belgrade Railway; and if it be not forthcoming, to know the reason why, I have learnt; sir, that the other shareholders have received their scrip—"

"Oh, sir, if you adopt such a tone with me", interrupted Mr. Warren, at once taking the matter with a high hand, "I can very soon give you an answer."

"Then pray do, sir," responded the physician: "and let that answer be the production of my scrip, to the amount of six thousand pounds in the Turkish Railway."

"And what, sir, if I tell you that you must have the kindness to wait awhile, until——"

"I do not choose to wait, sir! I have danced attendance upon you until I am tired—you have put me off with all kinds of excuses—and I will either have my scrip, or, or——" and Dr. Mordaunt fumed and grew red in the face, preparatory to giving vent to the threats which however he did not exactly like to throw forth from his lips except as a last resource.

"Or what, sir?" asked the stock-broker sternly.

"Well, Mr. Warren, if you compel me to speak out, I must tell you candidly that I shall apply to the Lord Mayor."

"Very good, sir," said Warren, with the most unflinching coolness. "We will go to the Lord Mayor together," he added, putting on his hat and then beginning to draw on his gloves.

"What insolence is this?" exclaimed the physician. "Do you forget, sir, that you are a sworn broker of the City of London, and that I can obtain a warrant against you for malversation or embezzlement?"

"And have you forgotten, sir, that you are a member of the medical profession, and that I can procure a warrant against you——"

"A warrant against me?"—and Mordaunt was evidently staggered—smitten indeed with a sudden terror—so that he became white as a sheet.

"Mandeville has not deceived me!" thought Warren to himself and he chuckled inwardly.—"You had better sit down a moment, doctor, while I tell you a tale of family misfortune, the real facts of which have only just come within my knowledge or else I should have long ago taken the requisite steps to bring an offender to justice."

Mordaunt sang, gasping for breath, and ashy pale, upon a chair.

"Fifteen years ago," resumed Warren, "when I was a mere youth, my sister Jane, who was a few years older than myself, died somewhat suddenly. You, Doctor Mordaunt—then plain Mr. Mordaunt, a poor struggling surgeon—attended upon her. You made such a report of the nature

of her illness and the cause of her death, as to preclude the possibility of suspicion in respect to the actual facts——"

"Mr. Warren, if you mean, sir, to asperse my character, I will not stop here——"

"Retain your seat, sir," interrupted the stock-broker? "you *must* and *shall* hear me!"—then, as the physician again sank down upon the seat whence he was endeavouring to rise, Warren went on to say. "The facts of that case have only just come to my knowledge. My poor sister had yielded to the influence of a secret passion which she formed for a young clerk in my father's office—a mere boy of nineteen or twenty. His name was Matthew Calvert. She was in a way to become a mother—you were made the confidant of her shame—she placed fifty guineas in your hand...and in consideration of this bribe you undertook to destroy the evidence of her disgrace while it was yet unborn. She perished——"

"'T is false, sir! false as hell!" exclaimed Mordaunt.

"'T is true, sir!" responded Warren, sternly. "The wretched boy, Matthew Calvert, who was afterwards transported for the forgery of my father's name——"

"What do you mean, sir?" cried the Doctor, vehemently. "Matthew Calvert has long been dead! You will not dare bring forward some base hireling of your own to personate him?"

"No: I admit that he is dead. But——"

"This is preposterous, sir" exclaimed Mordaunt, vehemently. "It is a vile fiction which

you have trumped up without the slightest shadow of a proof—”

“The proof? It is here” cried Warren. “A letter, written by your own hand, Doctor Mordaunt—addressed to young Calvert immediately after my poor sister’s death—conjuring him to keep the seal of silence on his lips—”

A deep groan, anguish-wrung from the breast of the miserable physician, attested but too evidently the stupendous truth of the painful narrative; and the stock-broker chuckled inwardly. Then a deep silence prevailed in that room: until at length Dr. Mordaunt, rising from his seat with an utter desolation of countenance, said in a deep hollow voice, “Give me that letter, Mr. Warren—and I will write you a receipt for the money which I placed in your hands.”

The stock-broker opened a cupboard, in which wines, spirits, and cordials were kept; and pouring some brandy into a glass, he handed it to the physician, who seemed as if he were about to drop. No thirsty traveller on Sahara’s vast arid wild ever tossed off the pellucid draught of water more greedily than did the wretched Mordaunt pour that potent alcohol down his throat. Then, with a long sigh indicative of some kind of relief, he sat down at the desk and penned a receipt for the money which he had lodged in Mr. Warren’s hands for the purchase of shares in the Constantinople and Belgrade Railway. The stock-broker then gave him the damnatory proof of his guilt of a bygone year when, under poverty’s stern pressure, he accepted the tempta-

tion held out; and Mordaunt securing it in his pocket-book, took his departure without another word.

“One!” said Warren to himself, as he placed the receipt upon his file.

Another hour passed; and then Sir Moses Bellamy was introduced. This was a tall, portly, florid-complexioned man, about fifty years of age, and dressed with great nicety. He was immensely rich, and habitually dwelt in some provincial town, where he possessed large factories. He had received the title of Knighthood through having in his capacity of Mayor taken up some fulsome corporation address to the Sovereign. He had risen from nothing; but he was by no means proud of being considered the architect of his own fortunes. On the contrary, he liked as little as possible to refer to the obscurity and the struggles of his earlier years. In his own neighbourhood he had the reputation of being a hard master; but he made a great show of philanthropy—while the John Bull openness of his looks tended to aid in the deception. The benevolence of his aspect covered and concealed the innate worthlessness of his heart, just as the smooth and polished veneer hides the inferior material upon which it is laid.

“My dear Warren,” he began shaking the stock-broker’s hand with apparent effusion, “I am delighted to fall in with you! I particularly want to make a settlement of that twenty thousand on my daughter, who is going to be married, you know, to Sir Peregrine Peacock—a good enough match, you know, though situated as I am, I might

perhaps have aspired higher. I shall regale all my factory people—buns and ginger beer *ad libitum*—no alcoholic liquor, Warren! But come, make haste, there's a dear good fellow! for I am in a hurry."

"But I am in no hurry, Sir Moses," answered Warren.

"How? what? You don't mean to say that there's any difficulty—"

"But I do. There's a very great difficulty. The truth is, Sir Moses," continued the stock-broker, with a coolness that was particularly astonishing to the portly Knight, "my funds are all so locked up at this moment—"

"Your funds, sir?" exclaimed Bellamy, his face becoming of a most apoplectic redness. "They are *my* funds! I entrusted them to you—I told you to do a particular thing with them—In fact, I have suspected for two or three days past that there was something wrong; but for fear of being mistaken, I did not choose to make inquiries."

"I tell you, Sir Moses, you cannot have your money. Now don't bluster or make a noise in the office," continued Warren, hastily and threateningly: "for if you do you will only force me into a retaliation which will lead to the most painful exposure."

"Exposure?"—and Sir Moses looked half frightened and half doubting whether he heard aright.

"Yes—I mean exposure, Sir Moses:"—and then Warren, walking straight up to his client, said in a deep but perfectly audible whisper. "You would scarcely like it to be known that some years ago the wealthy Sir Moses Bellamo, who holds his head so

high, was a prisoner in Newgate, for some low base felony!"

All the colour fled from the naturally rubicund countenance—the wretched man's under-jaw dropped—and he trembled violently.

"Again is Mandeville right!" Warren within himself: and ecstatic was his inward chuckling.

"Mr. Warren," said the abject Bellamy so soon as he could recover the slightest power of utterance, "it is a terrible secret which you have got in your possession: but I see by the manner in which you are using it that we may either ruin each other, or that there is an arrangement to be made."

"Whichever you like, Sir Moses; for when you entered the room, you found me a desperate man—although perhaps I did not immediately show it."

"But who told you of this hideous secret?"

"A person who will not mention it again," replied Warren. "Of this you may rest assured."

"What would you have me do? Do you want time for the payment of the money—it is a very large sum—"

"A mere trifle to you!—an enormous amount to me! Give me a receipt in full—and as God is my judge the secret shall never more pass my lips."

"It is a high price which I am to pay for the keeping of this secret," said Sir Moses with the tone and look of a man who was profoundly humiliated; but I nevertheless assent."

He sat down at the desk; and with a trembling hand he penned the receipt. He then expressed an entreaty that the stock-broker would keep the secret

THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

inviolable; and he took his departure.

"Two!" exclaimed Mr. Warren, as he placed that receipt upon his file.

It was now one o'clock; and the stock broker thought of some lunch. He felt elate and happy; he had already been relieved in the space of a few hours of an immense load of difficulty—and he had therefore every reason to calculate upon the efficiency of Count Matodeville's intercession and suggestions in the cases which remained to be settled.

It was now one o'clock, Phipps," he said to his head clerk as he passed in the outer office: "and I think I shall just run down to Greenwich and get a snack at the Trafalgar, I shall be back by three. If anybody calls in the meantime, just say I'm gone—Where had you better say? Oh, up to Downing Street, to wait upon the Chancellor of the Exchequer, according to special summons."

Mr. Phipps ventured to smile faintly but very blandly bowing at the same time; and Mr. Warren passed out of the office. Taking a cab, he proceeded to the London Bridge Station; and thence in a few minutes he was conducted to a private room; and he ordered an exquisite repast to be speedily served up.

Now who does the reader suppose happened to be in the adjacent apartment at that world-renowned establishment for fish dinners and choice wines? None other than Mr. Sylvester Casey, who had brought down his mistress, the handsome Alice Denton, to regale her with a little banquet. It had certainly

on the part of Alice to induce Sylvester to launch out into such an extravagance: but she had however succeeded, and there they were seated at a table placed close against the open window dividing their attention between the good things on the dishes before them, and the pleasant view which the casement afforded. It was a bright and a beautiful day; the steamers crowded with passengers, were passing to and fro on the bosom of the Thames; and there were likewise several beautiful little vessels belonging to the Thames Yacht Club, cruising in that part of the river which takes a grand sweep round from Greenwich to Black wall.

"How pleasant this is!" said Alice, when one course of fish had been disposed of and the waiter was about to bring in another.

"Well, it's pleasant enough," answered Sylvester—"but deuced expensive. Indeed I don't see the fun of your having ordered salmon cutlets in addition to cels and whitebait——"

"Nonsense, Sylvester!" said Miss Denton: "you know you promised me the regular fish dinner; and I was determined to have it all. So don't go and make yourself miserable, nor me either by your meanness."

"Meanness? Come, that's rather too strong!" exclaimed Sylvester angrily. "Mean indeed! Why, look at the wine!"—and he pointed to a pint of sherry which he had ordered.

"I can't bear sherry—I never drink it," said Alice. "Oh, here is a waiter. Let us order——"

"Have some ale, dear," said her protector, entreatingly: then

in order to show off before the waiter, he stuck his quizzing-glass in his eye, ran his fingers through his hair, and talking very loud, went on to say. "Not but that it is quite the same to me what you drink, my dear. Only you know"—here he kicked her under the table—"champagne always *does* disagree with you; and I know"—here he gave her another kick—"you can't bear Hock."

"Well, never mind about the champagne disagreeing with me," interrupted Alice, with a mischievous smile. "I will risk it for once."

"Nonsense!" muttered Sylvester in a savage undertone. "Waiter, a pot of —"

"Yes, waiter—a bottle of champagne," and then Alice, laughing merrily, added. "You see, dear Sylvester, I am determined to make myself ill for once!"

"What the devil did you do this for?" demanded the young man the instant the door had closed behind the waiter. "Didn't you think the bill would be heavy enough as it was?"

"Oh, come," interrupted Alice gaily, "if you object to pay for the champagne, I am perfectly willing to do so out of my own purse."

"I was only in fun, Alice. How deuced sharp you are at taking one at one's word! At the same time I think the ale would have been better. But no matter, as the champagne is ordered—"

"Hush! here it comes, said Miss Denton: and in a few moments the report of the flying cork echoed through the apartment.

The countenance of the waiter beamed with satisfaction, for a waiter is always pleased with visitors who drink expensive wine.

"What were you telling me just now?" asked Alice after a pause, during which glasses of champagne were quaffed and fresh dishes were placed upon the table,— "something about your father being in a very ill humour this morning?"

"Why, yes—the governor was out of sorts," replied Sylvester. "and he pulled such a precious long face when I asked him for money, that one would have thought that he was afraid of being made bankrupt. So you see, Alice, the more difficult it gets for me to bleed the old fellow, the more you ought to be obliged for what I do for you."

"Don't talk to me in this strain Sylvester,—or else you will make me angry. Instead of doing much for me, you get more and more relectant every time I speak to you on money matters. But we won't quarrel now over these salmon cutlets and this excellent champagne! You were going to tell me why your father was so cross."

"Ah! the governor—who is never in the best of tempers at any time—was as contrary as possible. But it was enough to make him though! —and I shouldn't like to be in the shoes of a certain stock-broker whom the governor means to trounce this afternoon."

"What! beat him—chastise him with his fists or with a horse-whip?"

"Deuce a bit! The governor doesn't fight with those weapons. It will be a warrant from the

Mansion House or a summons from the Bankruptcy Court, unless the stock-broker cashes up."

"Does he owe your father much?" inquired Miss Denton.

"About five thousand," replied Sylvester,—"a great deal too much to lose. The governor suspects that there's something wrong in the affair; so he's determined to have his money back again; and if it isn't forthcoming, Mr. Warren—that's the name of the stock-broker—stands a devilish good chance of sleeping to-night in Newgate. The governor told me he should go to him precisely at three o'clock this afternoon: so at that hour I expect there will be a regular shindy."

"Well," said Mr. Warren to

himself, in the next room as he looked at his watch, "it is only a quarter to two; so I've got exactly an hour and a quarter before me—and *then* we shall see which will have most reason to look small, Mr. Michael Casey or myself."

The fact was that the window of the room where the stock-broker was lunching was also open, and the table was placed against it every syllable that Sylvester said was therefore plainly audible to the individual whom it somewhat intimately concerned. It will perhaps be satisfactory to the reader to know that the discourse in question did not at all affect Mr. Warren's appetite; but what he did ample justice to the repast which he had ordered.

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